

# ALFRED HITCHCOCK's MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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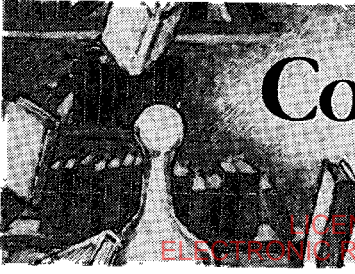


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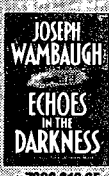
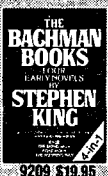
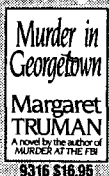
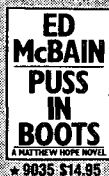
A black and white illustration of a bowl of custard with a spoon and a small cake.

**Colonel Custard,  
in the study,  
with a hook.**

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# CONTENTS



## SHORT STORIES

<b>THE QUIKTRIP CHURCH &amp; GRILL</b> by Rick Hills	<b>6</b>
<b>MERCY KILLING</b> by Ray Davidson	<b>21</b>
<b>THE RUST ON THE MOON</b> by J. P. Boyd	<b>43</b>
<b>HUNTER AND THE ICE MAN</b> by D. L. Richardson	<b>49</b>
<b>DEATH OF AN OTTER</b> by Joseph Hansen	<b>72</b>
<b>PACKER'S FORTUNE</b> by Thomasina Weber	<b>102</b>
<b>SHE LOOKED LIKE A MILLION</b> by Karen L. Todd	<b>113</b>
<b>MORAL DILEMMA</b> by Elana Lore	<b>123</b>

## MYSTERY CLASSIC

<b>THE MISSING PASSENGER'S TRUNK</b> by Arthur J. Rees	<b>130</b>
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## DEPARTMENTS

<b>EDITOR'S NOTES</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH</b>	<b>71</b>
<b>UNSOLVED</b> by D. G. Wells	<b>101</b>
<b>SOLUTION TO THE SEPTEMBER "UNSOLVED"</b>	<b>149</b>
<b>BOOKED &amp; PRINTED</b> by Mary Cannon	<b>150</b>
<b>MURDER BY DIRECTION</b> by Peter Shaw	<b>153</b>
<b>THE STORY THAT WON</b>	<b>155</b>

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# GUEST EDITORIAL

by Lois Adams

This month, we're turning the editorial over to our readers. In June, we reported on the results of a newsstand questionnaire. We were particularly interested in what kinds of mystery stories you liked best, and the questionnaire showed that, at least for the people who responded, suspense is the most popular, closely followed by the classic whodunit, the private eye story, and ghost or horror stories. Police procedurals and espionage ended up at the bottom of the list.

Numbers don't tell the whole story, of course, so we asked to hear from readers again, this time to figure out *why* suspense was such a favorite or *why* cops and spies did least well. Here are some samples of the letters we got (and, predictably enough, there's lots of disagreement, proving that taste in mysteries is as personal as taste in clothes or food).

Terri Willingham of Austell, Georgia, wrote: "The basic feature of the suspense and whodunit is generally ordinary people in ordinary places who are faced with an extraordinary situation. In a good story we

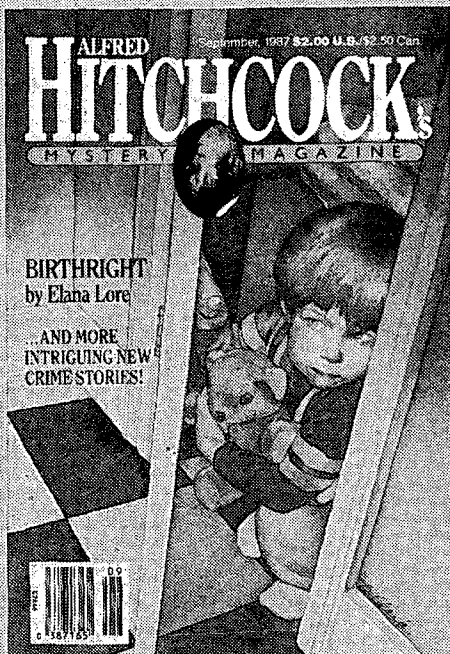
can feel that there is something horribly awry lurking beneath the surface... Like a bump in the night when we're home alone, this type of suspense story touches our hearts more than the adventures of some spy in an exotic country."

On the other hand, Gene KoKayKo of Pueblo, Colorado, said: "Espionage is my favorite type of mystery fiction because there is an international flavor. If the writer is very, very good, I'll get to taste the streetlife of Paris or some other exotic place that will prick the bubble around my provincialism. And as sure as rain in spring... there's going to be a shoot-out or some other fine piece of action-writing somewhere near the climax of the story."

Edith Wyatt of Decatur, Georgia, felt that: "The spy is not a person to trust, even [a spy on our own side]. He uses women, betrays friends, and is callous where death is concerned. Even a James Bond is not a person we want in the family."

And Malcolm K. McClintick of Indianapolis, Indiana, wrote:

*(Continued on page 20)*



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FICTION

# The Quiktrip Church & Grill

by Rick Hills

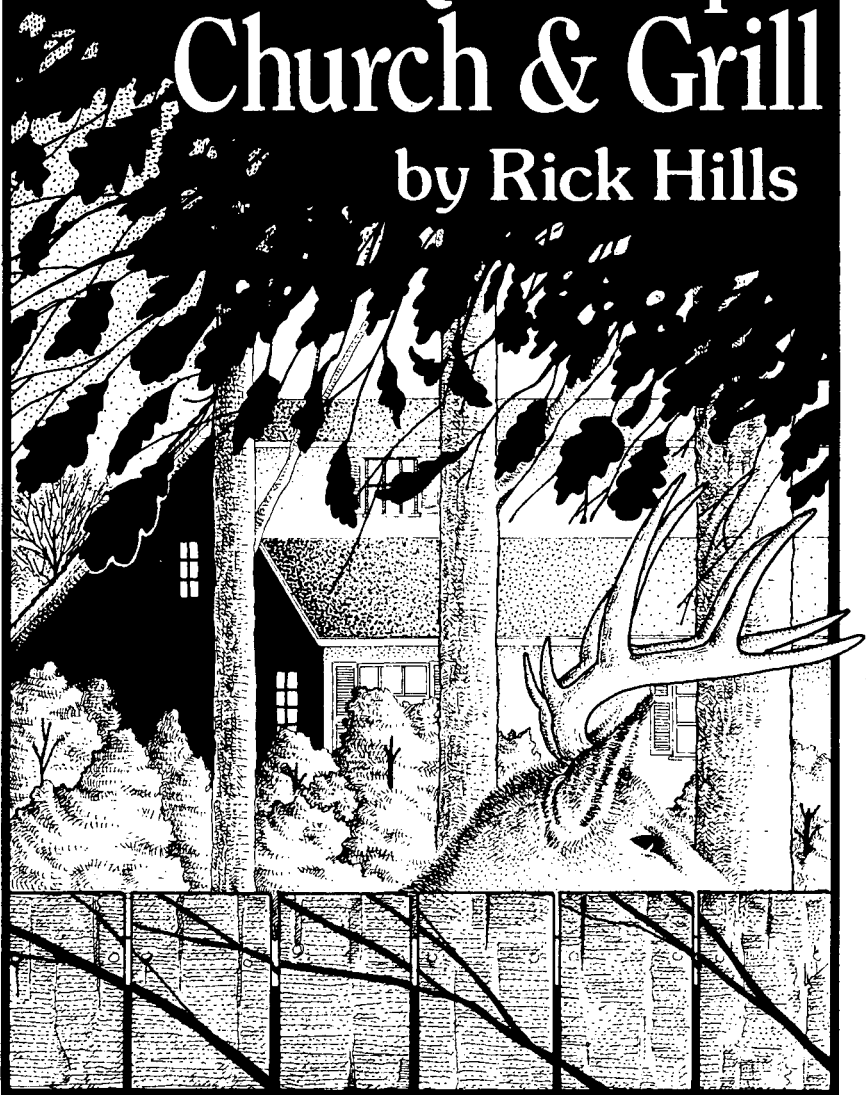


Illustration by Glenn Wolff

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Webber heard the voice. It woke him from a late Saturday afternoon nap produced and directed by too many early Saturday afternoon beers.

Some would call the voice God. Some the Devil.

It said, "Webber? You're late."

The voice was right. Dusk was redecorating Webber's room, hanging its tapestry over peeling paint, sweeping his dust balls under a carpet of dimness. It hid his heaping ashtray but failed to do anything about the smell of borrowed cigarettes gone up in smoke. It would take total darkness to handle the dishes, the stove, the empty beer cans, the unmade bed and torn chair where Webber was now waking.

Even dusk can only do so much.

Webber checked his watch—6:02 P.M. Twenty-six minutes to scratch together a dollar, cover the six blocks to the Forest Street QuikTrip, and buy his weekly Lotto numbers before the six twenty-eight jackpot drawing.

6-9-12-3-29-17.

Webber had chosen his numbers carefully. They were important numbers. So important they were easy to choose, so easy to choose because, when you got down to it, *they* had chosen Webber.

6,9: the month and day his mother died.

12: the number of days she spent in the hospital dying.

3,29: the month and day she gave birth to Webber.

17: the day of the month his mother was born.

The Lotto computer didn't see them that way. Each Saturday for the past eighteen months, Webber would walk into the Forest Street QuikTrip, check the CRT showing the current jackpot amount, and encode a very personal, paint-by-number portrait of his mother. In it he captured some of her light, reaffirmed that she *had* existed and that her light still existed in part—the part that shone on within Webber. Each week he would gather up a dollar (usually in the form of twenty refundable aluminum beer cans) for a chance to tell his story to the computer, and each week the computer, having never met Ada Webber, would say, "No, you're wrong. Your story is simply 3-6-9-12-17-29."

At first Webber was shocked by the cold-hearted rewrite. In retaliation he made a bad poem out of it. He made it into a rhyming mantra: "3-6-9, 12-17 and 29." It was easier to remember that way. He even came grudgingly to accept the computerized version. It made filling in the weekly card almost second nature to him; it had

become another way of signing his own name.

Part of him knew the astronomical odds against his ever winning, but another part, a part that grew stronger as each Saturday night's drawing drew nearer, knew that the importance of his numbers would overcome those odds, that indeed, those very odds would even increase the importance of his numbers. When he won, it wouldn't be luck. Recognition, vindication, and honor of his mother's essence would come down the computer's chute, riding on the backs of 3-6-9, 12-17 and 29, no matter how you wrote them.

Totem numbers.

Part of him knew it was crazy. Part of him felt it was owed.

Webber shook the last of the greenish-blue bread from its plastic sack and started stuffing aluminum cans into what would have been the bread's casket. "Two, four, six, eight . . . nine, ten . . ."

**M**oving.

It's something dusk does well. It hasn't stopped since the earth first started. Some say dusk moves around the earth, others that the earth spins into a pool of darkness and dusk is just the shallow end.

Name it and claim it, get the pope and president to swear you're right—it doesn't matter. Dusk, like its cousin Hope, doesn't give a damn about its admirers.

Tonight was no exception. Not even the sight of Webber stuffing empty beer cans into a moldy bread bag was enough to slow dusk down. Spread by a paint crew of gods, dusk's no-drip dimming light changed the color of Forest Street, crossed Highway 1, darkened Moseby's harvested cornfield, washed over two deer hunters about to call it a day, covered the woods bordering the cornfield and along with it the eight-point buck the hunters thought they might have hit an hour ago, darkened the river, then some more woods, before rolling west down Interstate 80 towards Des Moines and finally Nebraska.

The hunters were pissed. Their licenses expired at dusk.

The eight-point buck felt relief but he didn't know why, exactly. Dusk was dusk and dark was dark and safe was safe and they all had something to do with each other but he didn't care. Maybe they all showed up at once. Most of the time. He had good reason to feel relieved this day was over, even if he couldn't remember why. His belly full from a night's grazing, he was headed to the day's bedding, just about sunrise, when the first shots tore through

the trees and the branches started exploding above his head. When it wasn't the hunters, he had had to run off not one but two young males trying to get at his females. The first male was just a pup, the second almost took him. Even at three hundred fifty pounds, his stature wasn't enough to scare off the young bucks any more. He was getting old. The air was filled with females in heat. He had bred four, maybe five. If he could count, and being male, he'd say more like eight or ten. In between females, more hunters, and Moseby's damn German shepherd. He spent his normal sleeping hours crawling through thick brush when he wasn't hiding in it. Then, then the hard slap of being grazed by a twelve-gauge slug just before dusk. The last of the day was spent trying to lose whatever was following him, keep out of clearings, lick his wound, stay in his own territory, the smell of females all around him mixed with the smell of his own blood and if he could smell his blood, then Moseby's German shepherd could, too.

His bowels were empty from fear and pain, he was thirsty and exhausted.

He walked to the river and drank the cold dark strength. Then he found a thicket and lay down. The salt from his wound was addictive. His senses told him it was okay for now, no smell of danger, the ground was quiet, no out-of-place movement, just the woods darkening steadily.

Dusk was all right by him.

**W**rong, wrong, wrong. It was all going wrong.

By now he should have had the cans gathered, the ticket bought, and be in the Sherwood drinking beer with his friends. Right now, this very instant, he should be sipping on an Old Style, leisurely awaiting the televised drawing. Or, if his friends had any money, taking it easy the rest of the night and reading whether this was his week in tomorrow's paper.

Webber wasn't superstitious, but he knew what it felt like to feel lucky. The feeling you get when, step by step, everything falls into place and you break the old record in pinball or hit all the lights on yellow in heavy traffic. Everything clicks.

Tonight didn't feel like that at all. His routine wouldn't be his routine. He was a half step out of phase. He wouldn't be in the right place at the right time. He hated being late. He hated being in a hurry, and he was up to his neck in both.

And right now Webber *really* hated his bread sack.

It takes twenty cans to make a dollar, and a bread sack only holds ten.

Everybody was talking at once. Darkness was being constantly interrupted by the light bouncing across Moseby's field and slashing into the trees. The young night's air went on and on about where they were and where they were headed. The wind talked of nothing but gasoline and the ground kept raising its voice about how close they were getting.

Freezing edged running by two votes. Licking the wound slipped to third.

Climbing and climbing in intensity, the clamor was intolerable now, each sense screaming to be heard over the others, all of them screaming the same scream, all of them proved true as the two all-terrain vehicles burst through the brush and slid to a stop within pissing distance of the deer, the teenaged riders revving their engines, the headlights setting the woods on fire with confusion, and above it all the ground shouting Run! Run! Run to darkness! and the deer was up and running with such force its leaving ripped a hole in reality that could only be filled with the flick of a white tail and a flood of the riders' adrenaline.

"Jesus Christ, what was that!"

"Look at the size of that sucker! Let's get him!" shouted the other over his shoulder, not taking his eyes off where their target had been.

One machine copied the other, from the false start to the revved-up chain saw imitation, to the nearly identical wakes of fertile earth and fallen leaves kicked up into the eerie red dimness cast by their fishtailing taillights. They left the clearing much as they had arrived, in mid-air, coming down on all fours, plowing up corn stubble, the riders yahooping and lurching and bouncing over rows the three hundred fifty pound shadow cleared with leaps as graceful as soft clouds gliding in front of a full moon.

He knew where they were without looking back. They had split up, one on each side of his trail, honking and screaming, lights flashing madly, engines whining a high pitch that sounded of pain, a cry of a wound that wouldn't stop. The familiar field turned alien, a ditch filled with water, he stumbled up the opposite embankment, hooves jarred hard on ground-with-no-give, and then, the sanctuary of darkness he had known back by the river.



The machines stopped when they saw they had lost their quarry. The eight-pointer had made it across the field, sloshed through the drainage ditch, and then, it seemed almost nonchalantly, walked across Highway 1 and disappeared into the dark back yards of the houses on Forest Street.

The game was over as the teenagers sat on their low-idling machines. It was a game of the ages, only played by different rules. The high-tech predators were in it only for the laughs. No one had told the deer about the rule change.

He had been honestly running for his life.

“**Y**ou need to be washed anyway” was the way Webber broke the news to his pillowcase that it was time for a sudden change in careers. That, and the fact that Webber had grabbed it by its pillowcase ankles and shook its reason for being out onto the bed, convinced the dirty linen that, yes, it would be happy to carry returnable cans to QuikTrip.

The Sack of Ten went in first.

Then Webber made his way around the ill-lit room stuffing cans, some with a forgotten swallow still in them, into the cloth sack like a burglar in a Grade B movie or Santa Clause in reverse. “Mr. Eighteen, Mrs. Nineteen,” he announced each important arrival as they entered Chez Pillowcase, “Dr. Twenty and Messrs. Twenty-One, Twenty-Two, and Twenty-Three.

“Not a full house, but a big enough crowd to cover the Lotto ticket with some left over. Add to that—”

“Webber?” It was the waking voice again. “What *are* you doing?” The voice was right.

“Oh, nothing much,” Webber answered sarcastically. “I just thought since I had a minute or two on my hands I’d just, you know, go around the place and name all my beer cans.”

Time never grows up and most men spend their lifetimes babysitting it. Child neglect comes to mind here, perhaps even abuse. Webber pled guilty and reformed, his mind became clock-conscious, his vision acute. “Got my jacket, cans, and keys.” He patted his key pocket, locked his room, checked his watch. “Twenty minutes. The truck’s out of gas, have to hotfoot it through the back yards, make sure I miss the clotheslines.”

The outside stairway was a wooden xylophone with twenty-nine keys, his feet were mallets as he rap-pa-ta-tat, rap-pa-ta-tat, rap-

pa-ta-tat-tat-tat-tatted down into the back yard. At the end of his song was a large pile of empty bottles and cans, clutter to people who had a job, the price of Pall Malls to Webber. His conscience looked up at him with one eyebrow raised. "Neighborhood Beautification," Webber explained. "Oh, in that case . . ." and his conscience went back to its crossword puzzle.

Webber took the top two twelve-packs.

The shadows felt good and there were plenty of them, but this was a strange world he had limped into. There was wide gravel as at the river, but it was rutted and there was no river. On either side of the gravel the grazing was grazed short but no scent of what grazed it. As he walked warily along the gravel he passed through invisible cloudbanks of smell, each color-coded for his nose, some colors he couldn't recognize, others trying to hide. His nose saw right through the cans where rotting food hid, and the frequent outbuildings whispered, "In here. Machines are in here." Fallen fruit and soft vegetables were out on either side of the gravel, and several kinds of smoke were in the air, some old, some new. Leaves crunched under his feet, gravel clicked when he was on it, and an occasional machine went by on the other side of the big-buildings where men walked by the splotches of light and their steady noise and voices were muffled.

And everything he took in came wrapped in Dog.

He licked his wound, looked up, licked again, and then a third time. It reassured him, comforted him, and it was the one thing that didn't smell of Dog.

Then the autumn breeze brought him a present. Water. His nose suddenly caught the welcome scent and his eyes were quick to catch up with his nose. Up ahead, in dim light, a man-thing, standing up off the ground and surrounded by man-things in the shapes of life, was where the scent was bedded.

Water.

Dog.

Water.

Everything told him it was too dangerous. Everything told him to keep to the shadows, to find his way out of this place. Everything but thirst.

And he was thirsty.

Webber was still late, but he had his lateness under control. Memory and the light from the windows made his back yard jaunt a journey of smoothness. Everything was familiar to him, the gravel alleys, the garages, even the garbage cans and the gardens gone to seed. Somebody had burnt leaves that day and someone was trying to sneak in one last barbecue before winter. He was falling back into step with the flow, and when he was in step with everything, he felt even stronger the presence of Ada Webber.

He wasn't feeling lucky yet, but it was getting close.

Mrs. Seresky's place was just across the next alley. He'd have to cut around her yard. She was an old woman who populated her lawn with windmills, plastic flamingos, cute little cartoon bunnies, and a frog the size of a beachball. As Webber stepped into the alley he stopped in disbelief. "Whoa, Mrs. Seresky. You've really outdone yourself!" he said, shifting the pillowcase of cans. There was a five, maybe six foot cement deer bent over Mrs. Seresky's birdbath.

At the sound of his voice and the clatter of cans, the yard ornament's head snapped up from the birdbath and stared directly at Webber. Before the thought could register, the deer was gone, bowling over a pink flamingo that Time and Mrs. Seresky had put in the wrong place.

"Good God" was all Webber could manage. He stared at the twisted flamingo now freed forever from watching over a birdbath from which it could never drink. "Was that a good sign or what?" The inkling never had a chance to blossom into an urge, there was no need to follow the deer. Deer made their way into town all the time. "But they're usually young does. Not old males, not *this* big." No, this deer was not to be chased for a follow-up glimpse. Once was enough for Webber. Once was all there *should* be. Anything more would spoil the moment. In fact, "I don't ever want to see that beauty again." It had happened because the deer had to stare at Webber, it had happened because the deer had to free the flamingo. It had happened because it had to, just as Ada Webber's numbers would have to happen eventually. "Maybe tonight's the night."

Webber wasn't superstitious.

"But was that a good sign or what?"

He cut through the adjoining yard, oblivious to the dogs barking from the direction where his big buck had run.

Dogs and barking and a porch light to see what's bothering the dogs and a call to the police. "It's a big one, lots of antlers. Ran right through our clothesline. Looked like it's limping. Wife wanted me to call you, 'though I don't know what good that'll do now. Clothesline'll never be the same."

**T**he last half block was all uphill, a steep side street that spilled onto Forest Street at the top. Webber saw the cross on top of the steeple first, then more of the steeple was revealed, then it was rising up from the QuikTrip roof and then plate glass with backwards beer signs and a small parking lot in front. The whole structure was framed in a low, cloud-darkened night, awash with reluctant light that seemed to be forced down onto the scene under the heavy weight of a November mist.

"What's this? A sign from God?" Webber laughed softly because the superstitious would love to leap to that conclusion. "Behold! The QuikTrip Church & Grill!"

Of course it wasn't a "sign"; walking uphill was natural trick photography. The steeple was St. Mary's, a couple of blocks behind QuikTrip, the backwards beer signs reflections from Sherwood's Bar across the street.

Webber knew all this. But he also knew he felt the Power. The rightness and the reason of his numbers, the deer, the sign that wasn't a sign but by God just as much a sign as any other—that's what he'd tell the papers after he won the million plus.

He was back on track, he could *feel* it. Destiny. He'd felt it before, usually each Saturday night, but never this strong. The place reeked with it.

QuikTrip's windows were splashed with specials on Marlboros, Old Milwaukee, and Microwave Sandwiches. Guarding the electric sliding glass doors like bunkers were boxes of Ice King Anti-Freeze, Generic Windshield Solvent, and Heet gas line treatment.

Webber stopped before activating the electric eye. The glass door told him they didn't keep more than fifty dollars in the register at any one time and invited him to play Lotto. Webber took a deep breath, shifted his pillowcase carrying the Webber Family Fortune, and told the disappearing door, "Don't mind if I do."

**O**n the ground, out in the open, tangled up in wires from out of nowhere and no warning, two dogs going crazy on their chains, and no idea of how it all happened—

And then the lights came on.



The wrongness of where he was overwhelmed him. He struggled to his feet, shook the wires from his rack, and limped away from the frantic barking and dangerous light.

He needed shadows and followed the gravel towards them. His senses were half asleep even as his heart was racing. Walking helped. The familiar came back to him one step at a time. As he slipped into the shadows, it was crossing cool water in the heat of the day. He absorbed the darkness and, with it, its strength. Clearing senses started making sense again, only in a strange way.

And ahh, the dark.

The machine appeared on the gravel slowly behind him, two points of light staring through the mist straight at him, another one making wide sweeps from side to side.

**T**o Webber it looked this way: the cans announced his arrival ever so lightly, sweetly in fact, like the soft bell at the front desk of a posh hotel, like in an early Cary Grant movie, one of the black and white ones.

The clerk had his back to Webber when the cans hit the counter. He could see it all now: the junior high punks had gotten into a fight over the latest *Playboy* and had thrown the video game through the plate glass windows out into the parking lot, will the insurance cover it? He turned around to two twelve-pack boxes, a grimy white bag soaked in one corner where beer was leaking onto his counter, and some Lotto junkie hunched over an IBM card, feverishly filling in numbers.

3-6-9. Webber blackened the boxes, quickly, carefully, a master alchemist that on this attempt would finally turn paper and pencil lead into gold. To the clerk without looking up, "Yeah, I got twenty-three in the sack and two full twelves, that's forty-seven—two thirty-five all told," 12-17 and 29. He took one last glance to make sure it was right and to get its attention, to mentally impress upon it his wishes for a successful journey and a fond farewell. "And could you please hurry." Webber handed his numbers to the clerk. "I don't know how much time I have left."

**T**he machine was a slow one, creeping, but its light stripped him of his darkness, had the power to freeze his legs, drew his eyes into its light and held him.

The trance could be broken for two, maybe three steps, but the lure was too powerful, beyond his control, the light felt so

strong he had to look back into the blindness and when he did, he was held again.

"Okay, Ed," the police radio sounded like a commentator before a putt on the eighteenth green, "we got him in our lights."

"What the hell are you whispering for? The damn deer isn't in the back seat, is he?"

"I'm in the alley north of the five hundred block of Forest Street heading east," the whisper continued. "He doesn't look like he has much left. Herding him towards you."

"Ten-four. Almost there."

He'd been looking in just the one direction far too long and he knew it. The piercing lights kept getting closer and closer and he knew it. This place was wrong and getting wronger with each heartbeat and he knew it. But each time he was sure he would leave, he wouldn't.

And he didn't know why.

**"M**ake sure you take those cans out of the boxes and sack, and make sure you sort them into their right bins," the clerk said as he fed the numbers into the computer. "I don't have to take 'em, you know. Law says clean cans."

"I know and I thank you, sir." With each whir and click of the computer the massive weight of Webber's obligation to himself and his mother was being electronically lifted. Against that, the clerk's insults didn't stand a chance.

The clerk wasn't getting out of this what he wanted, so he tried again. "Oughta make you clean up the stale beer. You know you got stale beer all over my counter."

"I'm sorry about that, sir. As soon as I'm done here, I'll be happy to wipe that up for you."

**T**he police car's windshield wipers were set on pulse because of the heavy mist. The next time they pulsed, quick ears described the sound as a second cousin to the snap of a twig, close enough to break the trance and welcome back The Run.

"Damn! He just spooked!" the radio cracked with alarm.

"Can you still see him?"

"Headed straight down the alley. God, he's flying!" and over the radio, the surging engine and reluctant gravel could already be heard.

"I'll cut him off at the al—no! There he goes. He's headed south, up the hill towards Forest, hit your lights and siren."

"That'll just scare him more."

"It'll also stop traffic. You get a deer that size in traffic and we'll have more than a dead deer on our hands, we'll be filling out accident reports clear into next week."

**I**t doesn't take long for a computer, a clerk, or an experienced can-sorter to do their job. But Webber had always found his thoughts traveled fastest when he didn't put his mind to it.

His mind took a deep breath and sighed. I did it. I'm back in the routine again. It had been fourth and goal at the nine, two out in the ninth, one and one at the line, no time left on the clock. Cliché City. Winners never quit. Quitters never win. Don't leave home without it. It was tough, I'll tell the reporters (knowing that he wouldn't), I wanted to quit. The pressure, the responsibility, it was almost too much. Almost. Yup, I've been playing this game for eighteen months. Oh, I missed once, maybe twice. Fact is, those misses? that's what really kept me going this time. I mean, can you imagine playing the same numbers, week after week, month after month, for over a year and a half, and then the one time you don't play—Bingo!—they come up!

Suicide, maybe. Heavy drinking for sure. I mean to tell you—

The computer emitted a high-pitched beeping as it spit Webber's receipt into the clerk's hand. The nonexistent reporters disappeared.

The clerk took a long look at Webber's numbers. "Well, it appears you're a very lucky man."

The beeping filled the store, shook its windows. Webber's throat closed, he couldn't make his hand drop its Old Style can. Oh, thank you God thank you—no, wait, easy now. The beeping finally stopped and Webber's heart with it. "What, uh," he cleared his throat, "what exactly do you mean?"

"That beeping," the clerk handed Webber his receipt, "means the computer's shut down for the drawing. Won't take any more numbers. Yours may have been *the* last numbers accepted for this week. I'd say that was pretty lucky, wouldn't you?"

"Yeah." God, it's a good thing I didn't start yelling I won! I won! "Yeah, pretty lucky." The can dropped on top of the pile.

"Your Old Style's in the Bud."

"What?"

"Your Old Style's in where the Buds go. I told you I don't get paid for sorting your cans."

"Oh. I'm sorry."

And Webber was aware of the police sirens for the first time.

Ahh, The Run. Even on ground-with-no-give, The Run never failed to fill his senses with all that is ever important. The machines behind him, lights flashing, both screaming with pain, hardly mattered any more. As he crested the hill there were more and more machines, all with lights, most screaming in different ways.

They didn't matter, either.

He fought the urge to dodge; for the first time his instinct didn't feel right. He had always run from death, but now, now he felt for the first time he was running *with* death. It gave him a strength he'd never felt before. It erased all fear and, with it, all the pain. He sensed openness in the confusion, saw the large buck on the side of the building, lowered his head without breaking stride, and became The Run.

It took the rest of the can-sorting before Webber calmed down from almost winning the Lotto even before the numbers had been drawn.

The sirens were getting closer.

He took his dollar thirty-five from the clerk. "How soon before you know the winners, sir?"

"That depends." He had countered Webber's politeness by first not letting him wipe up the stale beer and then by wiping the counter long after the mess had disappeared. "Sometimes the winner comes over the computer five, ten minutes after the drawing. Sometimes it takes a half hour. It'll be on the news at ten."

"Thank you, sir." Webber had already planned to follow his routine. He'd go across the street to Sherwood's for a few beers and purposely not seek out the numbers. He would savor the possibility until tomorrow's paper came out. Even then he'd read the front page, editorial, comics, and sports, deliciously teasing himself before going to the section that would tell him if fate through electronics had finally seen the light—

3-6-9, 12-17 and 29.

Horns were honking over screeching tires.

It had to happen this week. It had to have happened just a few



moments ago. The way he woke up; then the huge buck, the QuikTrip Church & Grill, and then, his were probably the last numbers in the entire state—

“What the hell’s all the commotion out there.”

Webber was already leaving the store. He stopped just short of the electronic eye’s field of vision. He peered out but could see nothing. “I don’t know. Can’t see for the reflection.” Webber zipped up his jacket and stepped towards the door.

It was a shock, such a shock it didn’t seem strange to be hit by a deer, by of all things his deer, or that he even recognized the deer, but such a shock it made its way into his brain and was finally translated, “God! Did I get hit!”

Webber didn’t know why he was crumpled on the floor against the base of the counter of the place he should have been outside of by now. He watched detached as the deer struggled to free itself, shaking Webber as a dog does a dishrag, only the deer wasn’t using its teeth. The deer staggered backwards out into the parking lot, Webber started to get to his feet, but something hurt so he didn’t really care. The deer backed farther and farther away, bits of glass sparkled on and off, but even more amazing is how fast my jacket is turning red. I’m in a room, maybe a hospital room, and there’s a woman there, she looks familiar, she looks like Mom when she was young, god, I recognize her now, it is Mom, back when she was well and I’m walking towards her, I start to put my arm around her shoulder but the closer I get the older she looks, older and older and sick and her face is disappearing and now it’s a skull with Mom’s hair and now she just vanished. Mom! Mom oh Mom.

Loud noises outside in the parking lot, voices, police radio over a loudspeaker, a gunshot, now a second and a third.

I’ve cut my hand. It’s a small scratch. Don’t remember how I did it.

Webber raises his hand and sucks gently on the scratch.

The computer kicks in, the winning numbers appear one at a time.

3—6—9, 18—25—30.

(Continued from page 4)

"Police and spy stories are least preferred because they're boring. . . . Short story cops have no flesh and bone, no deeply investigated characters. Police novel fanatics all tell me the same thing: they don't read procedurals for the *procedure*, but for the characters and personalities of the cops. In a short piece there's no room for this; the result is all procedure—and, therefore, boredom. . . . On the other hand. . . I don't think the characters matter to hardcore whodunit/puzzle fans—it's the puzzle that matters."

Another opinion came in from Marion from Oregon: "I like a *good* horror story but that's pretty hard to accomplish in a short story. Not enough time to make you start looking over your shoulder or turning on extra lights. Also a touch of

humor is nice in everything."

Eva Helton of Eagle, Idaho, told us: "Give me the good old suspense, edge of my seat anticipation—situations I can identify with. . . and throw in a ghost or two or mysterious 'goings-on' with or without rational explanations—even an occasional police procedural will catch me if the case is really interesting. But spies and their slow as molasses. . . cross country journeys. . . blah!"

And then there were readers who like all types of stories; Bill Hillerich of Salem, Oregon, wrote: "I'll take any story if it is interesting, well written and, preferably, has a smidgen of suspense."

And so we end as we began, with a solid vote for suspense. Thanks to all of you who wrote in; we always like hearing from you.

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*Lois Adams is the Managing Editor of AHMM.*

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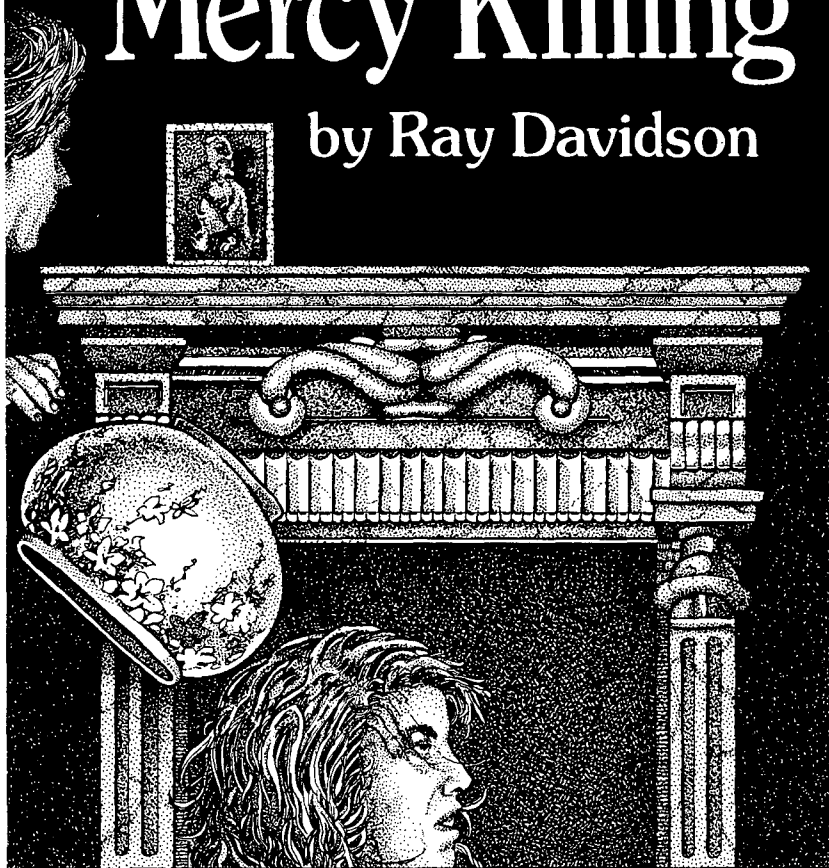
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# Mercy Killing

by Ray Davidson



Sister Martha Gratia bent low over the bristled face, searching intently for any signs of life. They had carried him into the infirmary only minutes before, following the street accident outside, and

though she had immediately summoned Dr. Medici, he had not yet arrived.

Her crisp habit crackled slightly as she bent lower, bringing her cheek close to the man's slightly opened mouth.

The smell of stale whisky was revolting, but she ignored it. All her attention was concentrated on the sensations on her cheek. She would, she thought, have detected the faintest stir of breath, but there didn't seem to be any. She straightened a little and turned her head to look down into the rather brutal face, and immediately the man's eyes opened and he looked directly up at her. The whites, she saw, were bloodshot, but the irises were emerald green.

For a moment, the two stared at one another. Then his eyes shifted as he took in the framing wimple and heavy black robe. His lips opened.

"Mercy!" he murmured.  
"Mercy, my God!"

Then he died.

**"I** told Lieutenant Ramirez that Garfield couldn't possibly have been drunk," the tall, angular woman stated. She was seated on the client's side of Herringbone Tweede's battered old desk. "We do not allow any of our staff to drink—certainly not the chauffeur."

"But he wasn't on duty, was he?" Herringbone asked gently.

"That makes no difference. We are strict teetotalers, Mr. Tweede. The lieutenant said that if I was not satisfied with the police investigation, I could come to you, though why he

called you Herringbone I am sure I do not know. He seemed to feel that you were quite capable, although . . ." She looked about the shabby office and her voice trailed away in a momentary uncertainty.

Tweede sighed. "I'm not sure what you want me to do, Ms. . . ." He glanced at the yellow pad on the desk before him. ". . . Albright. The police . . ."

She rallied immediately. "I am sure the police are doing their job, but they do not seem to understand. Garfield was not a drinking man! I want you to find out why he was in the street in front of that convent . . ."

"Hospice," Tweede said.

"Whatever they call it. Don't interrupt. I want you to find out who it was that ran over him and why."

"Why?"

"Because he was our employee and . . . Oh! But I should have thought that would be obvious, young man. Garfield was deliberately murdered."

Tweede blinked. "Murdered?" he echoed. "The police . . ."

"I am aware that the police think it was a hit-and-run," the woman continued. "I suppose in one sense it was. But it was not an accident. The police keep babbling about Garfield's being drunk and stepping in front of a truck. I told them and I tell you that Garfield was *not* a

drinking man. He certainly was not drunk. He knew our views on drinking, and . . . ”

“Ms. Albright! I understand the autopsy revealed alcohol in the blood. I’m afraid you can’t argue with the facts.”

“Mr. Tweede, facts are *always* subject to interpretation and *never* meaningful beyond the context in which they are defined. And please don’t use that dreadful ‘Mizz’ when addressing me. You may call me Dr. Albright. My title is academic. I am a Ph.D. and a full professor of philosophy at Goodpasture College in Pasadena. But I will not be referred to as a meaningless and genderless ‘Mizz.’ ”

Tweede blinked again. He had the feeling he had been summoned before the principal. The fact that he was actually seated behind his decrepit desk in his own office on Olive Street in downtown Los Angeles failed to change the feeling. The woman dominated the surroundings. He was sure she always would no matter what they were.

“I hardly see how you can argue with the test results,” he objected mildly. “The autopsy . . . ”

She waved his words away as though they were a small cluster of annoying gnats. “I am aware that the tests revealed alcohol in Garfield’s blood at

the time the autopsy was performed. I am also aware that it must have entered his bloodstream shortly before he died or it would have metabolized away. But the position taken by the police is the merest supposition based upon not one shred of real evidence.” She ticked off points on her fingers. “A. Alcohol in the blood. B. Run over by a motor vehicle. *Ergo*, C., he was drunk and had stumbled into its path. Pah! Arrant nonsense! Sheer speculation masquerading as logic! Garfield was murdered. He was deliberately struck down and run over. I want to know who did it and why.”

“You must have some evidence for what you say, you know,” Tweede said. “I’m afraid the police aren’t going to mark it down as murder simply because you think that’s what it is.”

“Of course not. I did not believe they would. Or should, for that matter.”

“Then you have evidence? Something tangible?”

“Certainly. Someone has been trying to kill the Albrights for years.”

She might have been announcing the time of day. Tweede’s stare must have annoyed her. “Ever since Father died, there have been attempts,” she explained sharply. “Most of them have been clumsy



and foolish. We have learned to cope with them quite well on our own. This is the first time one has actually succeeded. That is why it is so important that we get to the bottom of it. One cannot expect whoever it is to go on continually fumbling and never learning anything from it. Everyone learns from experience eventually. And my sister Hope is quite frightened by it all."

"But Garfield was not an Albright, was he?" Tweede protested.

She drew herself up and her voice became cold. "He was our employee and our friend," she said.

In spite of himself, Tweede blinked again, then sighed. "I suppose you had better tell me about it," he said, "... from the beginning."

**T**he old house smelled of money, mothballs, and incense. Hope Albright, as Tweede had already been told, was heavily into mysticism. He glanced around and felt himself at home. The furniture was shabby enough that it might have graced his office except that there was such a lot of it—very solid, very worn, and very dark. But he had time for no more than a glance, for a dowdy woman wearing her forty or so years and her apron with equal in-

difference materialized at his side and gave him a suspicious stare as she seized his hat. So he was obliged to follow his client into a gloomy drawing room dominated by a huge marble fireplace and several heavy canvases of unknown and forbidding people.

"This is Mr. Harrington Tweede," Dr. Albright announced. "I am told that his friends call him Herringbone, but I think we may assume that he is not an idiot. I have engaged him to investigate Garfield's murder."

There were two women in the room. One of them, smallish and plump, clutched a handkerchief to her bosom at the announcement. "Please don't use that *word*, Faith," she cried in a breathless, little-girlish voice. "My nerves simply can't stand it. I haven't been able to concentrate for the past three days, and I know Homer is getting very impatient."

Tweede had an immediate vision of the blind poet, both toga and hair askew, drumming his fingers on some celestial tabletop and frowning in annoyance. Faith Albright could have told him it wouldn't be a toga, but ...

"All the more reason to get this thing disposed of once and for all," Dr. Albright replied in a brisk voice. Then, turning to Tweede, "This is my younger

sister, Hope Albright. She writes. Her pseudonym is Hope Benedict. Homer Richardson is her editor."

Bewildered, Tweede struggled to adjust. He had only recently finished reading Hope Benedict's *The Genius of Mozart*. That incisive, supremely intelligent analysis of the man and his music seemed entirely foreign to the plump little sparrow of a woman confronting him now, her frizzy hair bunched over her ears.

He settled for a quick, almost furtive shake of the hand before she turned away, now holding the handkerchief to her mouth.

"And this," Dr. Albright went on, "is my other sister, Charity Fuller."

Mrs. Fuller arose from the chair in which she had been sitting and came forward hand outstretched. Her walk was elastic and vigorous. Her long blonde hair swung about an oval face that had already graced magazine covers behind which she was praised as the epitome of modern athletic womanhood. She had won several regional swimming championships and a number of equestrian awards and was a professional-quality golfer. She looked like the mature Lauren Bacall.

"Mr. Tweede?" Her voice was low and husky. As a teenager back in the Midwest, Tweede

had been hopelessly in love with Lauren Bacall. Gingerly, he took her hand, moved it about in the air for a moment, then let go. She smiled broadly, and he felt his face go red.

"I suppose you've told Mr. Tweede about our problem, Faith," Charity continued. "I know it sounds pretty weird, Mr. Tweede, but it's true. Once or twice a year one of us gets involved in an accident. Only it isn't an accident. Someone wants to kill us and we don't know why. So far, we've escaped, but now they've killed Garfield, whoever they are, and it's getting serious."

"Can anyone tell me why, uh, anyone would want to kill your chauffeur?" Tweede asked plaintively.

Dr. Albright turned on him an impatient glance that must have quelled many a college senior. "As I've explained, Garfield was our employee and our friend. He had worked for the Albrights for years."

"He was the only one who could keep the Chrysler running properly," Hope Albright said from beside the window.

Dr. Albright frowned and her lips thinned. "Garfield was much more than a mere auto mechanic, Hope. Papa always said..."

"Of course he was," Charity agreed. "You mustn't let Hope mislead you into thinking we

don't care, Mr. Tweede."

"Oh, go ahead!" Hope Albright exclaimed, one hand clutching the string of beads about her neck. "Pick on me, all of you! You can't possibly know how *desolate* I feel at what has happened. You drive your own car, Faith, and so do you, Charity. I only had Garfield. We were the *best* of friends. I—I don't know how I shall manage without him. I shall miss him every single day of my life!" And handkerchief to her face, she trotted from the room, weeping noisily.

Faith Albright broke the uneasy silence that settled in her wake. "You must forgive Hope, Mr. Tweede," she said. "She is distraught. And, to be fair, it is true that she cannot drive and has to be chauffeured wherever she goes, so I suppose it is something that would come to her mind at a time like this." She straightened and her manner became brisk. "And now, what do you need to do? How can we help you? Question us!"

But the sisters seemed to have nothing more than suspicions and intuitions to back up their claim of persecution. Their accounts of the "accidents" were sketchy and sprinkled with apologies. Though they clearly remembered the incidents themselves, when it came to dates, who was present, where everyone else was at the time,

and other relevant details, their answer was invariably, "I really don't know exactly." And they had nothing at all to suggest by way of motive.

"Hope thinks some malevolent influence from beyond is at work," Faith explained in the end. "But that is ridiculous, of course. Apart from the fact that there is no very convincing evidence for the existence of 'influences' from beyond, malevolent or otherwise, one must suppose that even malevolent spirits would have their reasons."

Tweede sighed. If it came down to spirits, he was out of his depth. "And you can't think of anybody at all who might have a grudge against you? Anyone who hates the Albrights enough to run down their chauffeur?" he asked.

They shook their heads. "We've speculated about it and tried to explain to the police so often I can almost recite it, Mr. Tweede," Charity said. "'There have been no threats, no communications, no demands for money. There is no one who hates us that we know of.' Of course, there are people who don't like us," she added, half smiling. "I mean, I have competitors who might like to see me eliminated, but . . ."

"Very well. I guess I'd better check out Mr. Garfield's room," Tweede said.

Dr. Albright raised an eye-

brow at the "mister," then glanced at her watch. "Would you show him, Charity? I have a meeting of the Faculty Board and Charles won't be back until three."

"Sure, Faith. Come along, Mr. Tweede. It's this way."

"You will find out who ran over Garfield, Mr. Tweede?" Dr. Albright called after him as he followed Charity Fuller out into the hall. He wasn't sure if it was a question or a command, but "I'll try, Dr. Albright," he promised. Privately he already felt that it was probably a lost cause.

The chauffeur's room was at the back of the house with its own outside entrance. It was neatly kept, almost military in its spare austerity except for a work table in one corner which was covered with papers, some newspaper clippings, a few books, and a lot of magazines, mostly automobile journals.

"I'll leave you here," Charity Fuller said after opening the door and waving him into the room. "Charles, by the way, is my husband. Charles Fuller. He's president of the Fuller Group. It's a family trust." She closed the door and he heard her footsteps going off down the passageway outside.

Tweede frowned at the closed door for a moment, then turned his attention to the dead chauffeur's personal effects. Nothing

seemed to be out of place, and nothing was hidden behind or in anything else. He turned to the table. Garfield, it quickly became evident, had been compiling a history of the "accidents." To Tweede's surprise, it went back at least seven years. With a kind of irregular regularity, one or another of the family had each time been involved in something that could have been very nasty. The list, dated July 21, 1985, was annotated—*July, 1981*: a fire in the wastebasket under the open window of Faith Albright's private study while she was napping in a nearby chair (Faith, who, the note reminded him, "does not smoke"); *February, 1982*: "something wrong with the soup" (all of them), which had turned out to be some form of food poisoning coupled, fortunately, with a liberal dash of brandy, one taste of which brought on a wholesale discarding of spoons that effectively botched the effort; *May, 1982, February, 1984, and December, 1985*: three separate traffic mishaps (one each), a favorite *modus operandi*, it seemed; *December, 1983*: a loose runner on the stair (Hope); *May, 1985*: a broken or possibly cut air hose on some scuba equipment (Charity); *July, 1985*: a defective or sabotaged car jack (Garfield himself) and apparently no one, including Garfield, was

sure which; *February, 1986*: a bust that fell from the mantel of the fireplace (Mae Meadows, the woman who had taken Tweede's hat and who had been cleaning out the fireplace at the time); *March, 1986*: a crude bomb made out of a bestselling romantic novel soaked in nitroglycerine (Faith); *October, 1986*: a runaway horse with a thistle burr under the saddle (Charles Fuller); and *April, 1987*: a rattlesnake in a crate of oranges (!—specific intended victim or victims unknown, but Meadows found it and brought the house down with a piercing and entirely unexpected but not surprising scream of panic).

Tweede laid the papers aside. Either Garfield really believed that someone wanted to kill the Albrights, or he had been busily compiling a record of his own attempts to do so. Tweede wondered which it might be. The dead chauffeur's penciled scribble in the margin beside the book incident read, "Dr. Faith sure to throw it somewhere. She always does that with books she dislikes."

Tweede was inclined now to agree that something most unusual was happening. He turned again to the dead man's personal effects.

He was poking into Garfield's sock drawer (Tweede always put his own valuables in the toe of a rolled-up pair of socks)

when the door opened and Hope Albright came into the room, stopped suddenly upon sight of him, and said, "Oh!"

"Did you want me?" Tweede asked.

"I—I thought perhaps . . ." Hope's eyes darted to the stack of papers on the table, then away again. "I thought . . ."

"I've been looking through Garfield's notes on the accidents," Tweede said.

Quite suddenly she ran forward and clutched at his arm. "I'm sorry I was so—so rude in the drawing room. You must help us find out who is behind these terrible, terrible jokes."

"Jokes?" Tweede's eyebrows climbed his forehead.

"My control has informed me that someone is playing practical jokes on us."

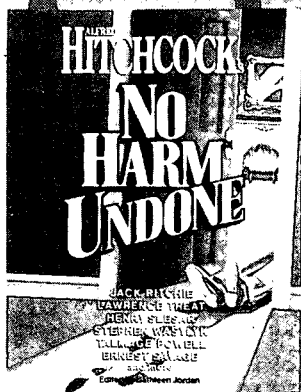
Some sinister official in Washington making encrypted telephone calls to agents around the country? Tweede immediately dismissed the notion as fantastic. Hope Albright might be the author of a highly intellectual book on Mozart, but she was decidedly not a secret agent.

"I mean my spiritual control, Madame Chouvert," Hope explained. "You probably don't believe in spiritualism—very few people do; relatively speaking. Certainly not *my* relatives. Oh! That was a pun, wasn't it? But Madame Chouvert says that someone hates us and is having



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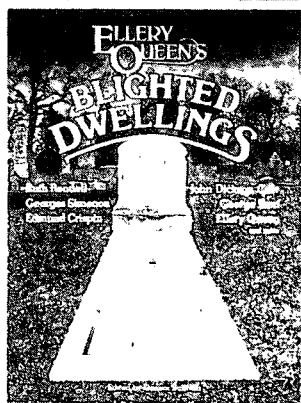
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fun at our expense. She says it could get out of hand, that it is dangerous for us. But she says you can stop it and that we must help you all we can."

Tweede tried to look modest: "Perhaps you could tell me about the accident on the stairs," he suggested.

A look of terror flitted over her face. "I . . . must I? I don't like remembering it," she faltered and, with scarcely a pause for breath, rushed on: "It was early in the morning. About four o'clock. I was coming down because I heard a noise—a door slam or something. I'm a very light sleeper. The toe of my slipper caught in the stair runner. It was loose and sort of looped up, you know. I fell forward. Luckily, my foot came free easily. The doctor said I might have broken my leg. As it was, I was badly bruised and absolutely terrified."

"When did this happen?"

"It was in December of 1983. I remember because it was just after my Mozart book came out. We had been reading the reviews the night before. We were, oh, celebrating a little, you know . . . but it wasn't what you think. I was perfectly sober and wide awake. We don't drink. Ever."

"Dr. Albright made quite a point of that," Tweede said. "Why? Are you Mormons or something?"

Hope Albright shook her head. "Oh, no," she replied quite seriously. "It's just that Mommy . . . You see, Daddy was always a very, er, positive sort of person. He liked things done his way and in his time—just the way he wanted. I'm afraid Mommy wasn't quite up to it. She couldn't cope very well, and Daddy was very strong on coping. We children didn't realize it until afterward, but she found it easier to cope if she had a little stimulant. She died of it eventually. It seems that she couldn't cope with that, either." Her eyes were wet with tears.

Embarrassed, Tweede turned back to the pile of notes. "Tell me about some of these other, uh, accidents," he said. "This one about the rattlesnake in the crate of oranges. Surely you must have . . ."

"Reported it? Oh, yes. We reported it. It happened only two months ago, you know. They came and took it away and the police asked some questions, but they couldn't make anything of it except that somehow the snake must have gotten inside the crate while it was being shipped. Madame Chouvert doesn't understand it either. They were Florida oranges. They're so much better for juice, aren't they? Meadows found it, you know."

"Tell me about Meadows," Tweede urged gently.

Hope shrugged. "There really isn't much to tell. Her name is Mae Meadows. She came to us from an agency about a year before Daddy died. We lost Hannah, our old housekeeper around then, and Daddy wanted someone to keep the house up. None of us was any good at that. She's not very intelligent or efficient, but she seems to understand us and we get on well enough with her."

"What does she do?"

"Anything that needs doing. Except cook. We have Hilda for that. Hilda has been our cook for ages. She came with Mommy, and when Mommy died, she was going to leave, but Daddy bullied her into staying. She's been here ever since. Daddy liked the way she did his scrambled eggs."

"How and when did your father die?" Tweede asked.

"He died in April, 1978, of a bee sting," Hope replied.

"A bee sting?"

"Yes. It's called anaphylactic shock. Actually, he asphyxiated, but that was brought on by the reaction to the sting. It had almost happened once before when we were little girls. Madame Chouvert told me afterward that the bee was animated by an evil spirit under the command of a living person, so you see, all this has been going on longer than we thought."

"You think your father . . ."

She hunched her shoulders in a shrug. "Madame Chouvert does."

Tweede considered. "Tell me about Garfield," he said. "Why was he keeping all these notes and clippings?"

She glanced sideways at the table. "But that's obvious, isn't it? He was trying to find out who wanted to kill us. He used to talk to me about it when we were driving somewhere. He wanted to find out what was going on, he said. I think he wanted to write a book about it. He was very *fulsome* in his comments when my *Mozart* came out and the reviews were so good. And it wasn't as though it was my first."

Tweede wasn't to be led astray. "How long had he been with you?"

"He was Mommy's chauffeur. I think he used to work for Daddy at the plant before Daddy brought him home as chauffeur—it was in the early sixties, I think. That was after Mommy got so she couldn't drive any more. He was a little sweet on Mommy, I think. Madame Chouvert says he is to be trusted—*was* to be trusted."

From somewhere in the distance a voice was raised. It was a man's voice, and it seemed to be pleading for alms. "Oh. That's Charles," Hope exclaimed. "He wants Charity, and she's gone

out. She asked me to tell him when he came. You'll have to excuse me, Mr. Tweede. Charles doesn't like being kept waiting. He's a lot like Daddy in some ways." With a fluttering of hands, she trotted to the door, pulled it open, and disappeared.

Tweede gathered up the notes and papers Garfield had left behind. He glanced at the books, but except for one on allergies, they seemed to have little to do with the case. Three were Westerns of the modern, socially conscious type in which it isn't his horse that arouses the passions of the hero, if you can call him that. Tweede sighed again and followed Hope Albright out into the passageway and back toward the front of the house.

**"T**here is very little I can tell you, Mr. Tweede," Sister Martha Gratia said in her dry but gentle voice. "There's really no reason to suppose it was more than a street accident, you know. I'm afraid the man was a little . . . blotto? Is it still a current term? We don't hear much contemporary language here."

"I recognize it," Herringbone admitted, "but I don't think it's used any more. How could you tell—that he was blotto, I mean?"

"We may be somewhat withdrawn from the world," the sis-

ter replied, "but we haven't lost our senses. I know the smell of Irish whisky, Mr. Tweede. It was—strong."

Tweede blinked. "Irish whisky?" he asked.

She inclined her head and the stiff, circling wimple framing her shriveled face cut deeply into the flesh under her chin. "Yes, indeed," she said.

Tweede was silent a moment. Then, "Why Irish, I wonder?" he murmured.

"Why not?" Sister Martha Gratia countered. "You are not prejudiced, I hope. He looked like a hard man who would like his whisky. He had a brutal face." She seemed unaware of the inconsistency of her words. "But he died shriven, Mr. Tweede," she added, her voice hushed and reverent in the remembering.

"You mean he spoke?" Tweede asked sharply. "Sorry! But did he really say anything?"

"I'm sorry, too," she replied. "I've aroused your expectations and I'm afraid I really cannot satisfy them. It wasn't anything that would help, you see. He merely asked forgiveness."

"For what?" Tweede said. Then, "I guess I shouldn't ask that. Isn't there some rule about the secrets of the confessional?"

"I am not a priest, Mr. Tweede. More to the point, he didn't confess anything. He merely asked God for mercy. Then he died."

"What did he die of, exactly?"

"He was very badly injured. Crushed abdomen and pelvis, broken neck . . . It was quite extraordinary that he lived as long as he did."

"You mean . . ."

"Oh, I think there is no doubt that the vehicle ran right over him, and it must have been a heavy one."

Tweede cringed inside. "Yes. Well, thank you, sister."

She put out a small, thin hand. "Tell me, Mr. Tweede. Why are you asking these questions?"

"The people he worked for—the Albrights—believe that it was not really an accident," Tweede replied.

"How . . . terrible! Accidents do happen, Mr. Tweede, and it's no one's fault. We can only accept them. God has His reasons and, in spite of appearances, He is not cruel. But man . . . It is hard to believe anyone could be that vicious. But, of course, man often is."

Tweede nodded thoughtfully. "May I ask you a question?" he said. She inclined her head and the wimple crackled softly again.

"I thought that the Vatican reforms . . . I mean, your, er, 'habit' . . ."

She smiled. "I have found that it is hard to give up the habits of a lifetime, Mr. Tweede." Her eyes twinkled

but she did not otherwise acknowledge the little joke, so he smiled and took his leave. So far, he reflected as he stepped into the street, he wasn't getting very far.

"Perhaps I expected too much of you, Mr. Tweede," Dr. Albright said.

"One can only go where the evidence leads," Tweede replied. "I'll admit that the 'accidents' are more than just accidents—some of them, anyway. That book, for example. But it isn't clear yet why anyone would want to kill any of you. And when you look at it, not one of the 'accidents' was very likely to succeed. If someone really wanted to kill an Albright, why not just buy a gun and shoot? Why all the rigmarole? What it all boils down to is that Madame Chouvert is probably right—it is a series of practical jokes and Garfield's death was a real hit-and-run accident." For a moment, his astonishment at what he had just said held him speechless. Then Dr. Albright's quick frown sent him hurriedly on. "Coincidences really do happen—oftener than we realize," he pleaded.

"I understand what you are saying, young man, but nothing will convince me that Garfield was the author of an

atrocious series of pranks, though I suppose I must believe that he did occasionally drink. You say you have the testimony of others to that effect, but . . .”

“We’ve found out quite a lot about Peter Garfield that I think you probably didn’t know. He kept an apartment downtown, for example, and he drank Irish whisky. And how can you explain those notes of his?” Tweede asked.

She snorted. “There are probably a dozen explanations that could be invented. Perhaps Hope is correct: he wanted to write a book. Everyone we know seems to want to write a book or compose music or something. It has always been like that. My father . . . We seem to have that effect on people—even my poor dead sister who hadn’t the brains of a hen. How she tried! I sometimes think, Mr. Tweede, that demanding fathers don’t realize just how terribly wearing they are on their children, especially the ones that cannot achieve. The poor girl finally ran away from home. It is a sordid tale—we never mention it. I don’t know why I’m talking of it now. You are a most extraordinary man, Mr. Tweede. But nothing will persuade me that Garfield would do such a thing to us. He was . . . I suppose I shouldn’t say anything, but he liked Hope and I believe she returned his affection. Not at

all suitable, but I am not and never have been prudish. If they . . . You know so much about us now that . . .” She shook her head angrily. “Are you going to do something about all this or are you not? We’ve told you everything we know about it.”

“Everything?” Tweede asked.

“Everything!”

“Did Miss Albright know that Garfield was married?”

Dr. Albright stared at him in astonishment. “Married?” she echoed as though she were not sure she had heard properly. Then her voice became icy with scorn. “You must be mistaken, Mr. Tweede.”

“The police haven’t been able to trace the whereabouts of his wife,” he said, “but he was married in 1973 to a woman named Mercy Pleasance. Lieutenant Ramirez . . . Are—are you all right, Dr. Albright?”

The woman’s face had turned dead white. Her eyes were huge in her thin features and her hand was clenched against her angular chest. “What . . . what did you say, Mr. Tweede?” she whispered.

“You’d better sit down, Dr. Albright,” Tweede urged.

“Yes,” she murmured. “Yes. You are right. I’d better sit down.”

Tweede helped her into a chair. Once she was seated, her eyes lost their blank look and



came alive. "Would you please repeat that statement, Mr. Tweede," she commanded.

"You mean about Garfield being married?" She nodded impatiently. "Peter Garfield was married here in Los Angeles in 1973 to a woman named Mercy Pleasance. The lieutenant . . . waaaiit—a —miiinute! Faith, Hope, Charity . . . and Mercy? Dr. Albright, you mentioned a dead sister. Was her name Mercy, by any chance?"

Dr. Albright nodded. "Mercy Pleasance Albright. She was the only one of us to whom Father gave a second Christian name and the only one who ever disgraced the Albrights. Not that the one has anything to do with the other. But from the first, she was willful. It was almost as though she were not an Albright at all. She was terribly stupid. Finally, she ran away when she was twenty-two. Imagine! That was in 1968. We heard nothing from her or about her for years. Then in 1974 we received word that she had died as a result of an auto accident. She had, we were told, been drinking heavily and had smashed into another car, killing the driver."

"Another accident," Tweede said.

Then, "How did you find out about her death?" he asked.

"We received a letter from her and a clipping about the

accident from a Florence newspaper. She had written the letter before she died and given it to a friend with instructions to send it to us upon her death. It was a terrible letter. She accused us of casting her out. We did nothing of the kind, of course. She left of her own volition. She accused us of responsibility for her death 'amid ignorance and squalor.' Those were her words—probably copied from somewhere. Later on, Father took us to see her grave and lectured us on the evils of drink.

"But we were not to blame, Mr. Tweede. It was not our doing that she left the family and drank herself to death. And now you tell me that Garfield was her husband. I can hardly believe it. Does that mean that Garfield . . ."

"Just when did Garfield first come to you as your mother's chauffeur?"

"I don't remember exactly. Mother died in December of 1967, so it must have been a year or so before that. But that means . . . he must have married her after he came here to work for us. And we never knew. Did he hate us all that much?"

Tweede shook his head. "I don't know, Dr. Albright. Excuse me. I want to make a phone call."

"Of course," she said in an

exhausted, numb sort of voice.

Sister Martha Gratia accepted the call.

"It is not customary, Mr. Tweede," she said, "but I understand that you are doing what you must do. How can I help you?"

"Can you remember the exact words Garfield said just before he died?"

"Of course. Do you wish me to repeat them to you?"

"If you would, please."

She paused to give herself time to recall, then repeated the words that had so moved her. "He said, 'Mercy! Mercy, my God.' Then he passed away."

Tweede closed his eyes and leaned over the telephone on its little table. "Think about it, please, sister. Try to remember," he begged. "Could he possibly have said 'Mercy, by God?'"

He could hear the sister draw a quick, protesting breath, but no words came along the wire in answer.

"Sister? Did you catch what I just said? Could the word possibly have been 'by' rather than 'my'?"

At length she replied. "I do not want to believe so, Mr. Tweede. It would mean . . . But, yes, it could have been so. He did not have good control of his voice. There had been internal damage, you understand, and his voice was little more than a murmur. I remember that he

spoke as though there were some obstruction in the throat. His neck was broken. Yes, it could have been. Have you cause to believe . . ."

"I'm afraid so, sister. I think he knew who ran over him. Thank you."

Tweede hung up the phone and stood for a moment, pondering.

When he turned, he found Dr. Albright's eyes fastened on him and glittering with a terrible intensity. With what seemed like a great effort, she straightened in her chair. "Mr. Tweede," she said, and something of the old, imperious tone cloaked her words with an authority he would have found hard to resist if he had been so inclined. "Unless I am mistaken, you are suggesting a monstrous thing. You are suggesting that my sister Mercy is still alive, that she murdered Garfield, and that she has tried to murder us. That is what you are suggesting, is it not?"

Tweede sat down in a chair facing her and leaned forward.

"Dr. Albright, you have been trained to think logically and clearly. Think about this. You receive a letter from your sister with a clipping from an Italian newspaper stating that she was killed in an accident. The letter has every appearance of being genuine—you must have recognized her handwriting.

Sometime later, your father takes you to Italy to view her grave. You . . . ”

“You have already made at least two errors, Mr. Tweede,” she interrupted. “The clipping came from a small suburban weekly published here in Los Angeles. I was referring to the Florence over by Huntington Park and Southgate just a few miles from here. I have forgotten the name of the paper, but . . . ”

“Los Angeles? But I thought . . . I’m sorry. I can’t seem to get you people straight. All right, that just makes it clearer than ever. What I was about to say is that beyond that letter and the newspaper clipping, you have no evidence that she really died. I hope you kept the clipping.”

“There was the grave, Mr. Tweede. Father . . . ”

“Yes. I’m not sure, Dr. Albright, but I’d be willing to bet that there is no suburban weekly published in Florence. There are, however, a number of places where one can have phony newspaper articles printed—I have one with my picture on the front page over an article identifying me as wanted by the sheriff for cattle rustling. That one was printed at Knott’s Berry Farm. The letter, on the other hand . . . ”

“It was her writing,” Dr. Albright stated. The fire had gone

out of her now and she sat like an old woman.

“Give me a few days more,” Tweede urged. “I think I can clear this up now. You do want it cleared up, don’t you? Even if . . . ”

She nodded, her eyes closed. “Yes, Mr. Tweede,” she whispered. “I want it cleared up.”

Tweede surprised himself by reaching forward and patting her limp hand. Then he stood up. “I’ll be back soon,” he said.

**T**hey were gathered in the shabby drawing room—Faith, Hope, Charity, Charles Fuller, and Her-ringbone Tweede—and Hope, rushing into speech, assured them that Garfield would have been there, too, if he had been able. The others greeted this in silence. Dr. Faith held herself stiffly erect on a straight chair at the end of the table, obviously distressed. The others were seated in various poses, all of which suggested some degree of uneasy curiosity. Tweede stood by the fireplace.

“I have a number of things to tell you,” he began. “I don’t think you’re going to like any of them very much. In the first place, your sister, Mercy Pleasance, did not die as a result of a car crash in 1974. It does not appear that there ever was such an accident. There is no *Florence Merchant*, the newspaper

from which you supposedly received the clipping describing it, for example. But the letter was genuine enough. And a Mercy Albright did go into the hospital for surgery. Shortly afterwards, she released herself from the hospital and disappeared.

"For another thing, Peter Garfield and a woman named Mercy Pleasance were married in Los Angeles in 1973 . . ."

"Oh, no, Mr. Tweede. No! There must be some mistake!" Hope stared at him, her face quivering.

"You didn't know?" He watched her closely, but it was evident that the idea was completely new to her. He didn't think she was that good an actress. "No, there's no mistake, Miss Albright," Tweede said as gently as he could. "He was married. Not only that but in 1975 he sued for divorce. That was after the 'accident' and Mercy's disappearance. The grounds were desertion. It was not contested. I'm afraid both the marriage and the divorce are matters of public record."

"And you think these—our 'accidents'—are the work of Mercy Pleasance?" Charles Fuller demanded. "You're out of your mind, Tweede. The woman must be dead."

"She was buried," Charity added. "We've seen . . ." Tweede shook his head.

"There is a grave, yes. The cemetery records originally listed the occupant as 'Unknown Female.'"

"But the marker, Mr. Tweede!" Hope cried. "It says Mercy Pleasance Albright. I've seen it. We've all seen it."

"I know. I've seen it, too. I also found the supplier. You won't like this. The stone was erected three months after the burial, and it was bought and paid for by a Mr. Virgil Albright, who supplied all the information for the inscription."

At once the room was alive with indignant objections. But one voice rose above them all with the ease of long practice. "Be still, all of you! Shut up, Hope! Be quiet and listen. I would suggest that we allow Mr. Tweede to complete his statement. This is merely wasting time."

The clamor quickly subsided, and even Charles Fuller, after a moment of irritation while he considered disputing Faith Albright's command, thought better of it and sat back with a challenging "Go-ahead-and-prove-it" look at Tweede.

"I have no proof, but I don't think your father knew that the grave was not Mercy's," Tweede continued quietly. "Garfield, on the other hand, did know. He must have known because one year later he was granted a divorce. In other words, he knew

that his wife had not died of any automobile accident. He must have told Mr. Albright about Mercy, lied to him about her death, and Mr. Albright erected the marker. But I think your father had kept track of Mercy Pleasance. I think he knew of the marriage and I think he advanced Garfield the money for the hospital bill. We'll never know for sure. The hospital records only show that the bill was paid in full by Peter Garfield—in cash.

"Now, there is no record—not in this county or in adjacent counties—of the death of anyone named Mercy Pleasance. So unless she has left the L.A. area entirely, she's still alive and still here."

"But you haven't explained, Mr. Tweede," Charity said, "why you think our own sister would try to kill us or why she killed Garfield. I, for one, don't believe it."

"It's the Holmes principle," Tweede replied patiently.

Puzzled, they stared at him. Then Hope said, "Oh! Of course. Once you have eliminated everything else, whatever remains must be the truth. But..."

"Look at it this way," Tweede urged. "Mercy was not like the rest of you. She was 'terribly stupid,' according to you, Dr. Albright. She tried hard, but never succeeded at anything.

Your father expected high standards of achievement, and she couldn't measure up. The letter you received implies as much. Then there are the 'accidents.' The simplest way to kill someone is to shoot him or her. The gun laws being what they are, it's dead easy to get a gun that can't be traced. And they're easy to dispose of. So why all the exotic stuff? I think she was copying murders she'd read in whodunits, where the methods are often ridiculously exotic. Even so, she made a mess of it—though not as big a mess as you might think at first. Some of the 'accidents' must have been meant just to frighten you.

"Garfield had decided Mercy was behind them. He knew she was still alive, but he didn't know where she was. Mercy hated you because you were so much cleverer than she was, and she had probably told him so. Look at the sequence. The fire in Dr. Albright's study happened in July, 1981. What else happened in July, 1981, Dr. Albright?"

"Why... that... July second was the day I was appointed full professor at Goodpasture. But..."

"Yes. And the poisoned soup came a week after you won the equestrian championship of San Bernardino County, Mrs. Fuller. The loose runner on the stair

happened two days after Miss Hope's book was published. The broken scuba gear happened less than a month after Mrs. Fuller appeared on the *Sports Illustrated* cover in that story on golf. Garfield's notes are dated June 21, 1985, right at the top of the first page. In July, the car jack was sabotaged and he almost got flattened by the Chrysler. In February, 1984, Dr. Faith is elected to the Faculty Board and gets her article on Spinoza published and three days later, she almost gets run over by a speeding car. Then in February again, 1986 this time, she's elected to the National Academy and two weeks later she receives a crude, botched book bomb. Mr. Fuller becomes president of the Fuller Group and the following day, his horse bolts because a thistle burr gets under the saddle and he is thrown."

"I see. Yes, when you put it that way . . ." Charles said. "We'd better get busy and find Mercy."

Dr. Albright straightened in her chair and drew her shawl about her shoulders. "It's chilly in here," she said. She picked up the telephone on the table beside her chair. "Meadows? Please come and light the fire in the drawing room. We're cold." She hung up and glanced at Tweede. "Charles is right. We must find Mercy. And just

how will you go about that, Mr. Tweede? How many people are there in metropolitan Los Angeles? It has been thirteen years, according to you, since Mercy left the hospital."

"It isn't as difficult as you might think, Dr. Albright," Tweede replied. "Actually, finding missing people or people who choose to disappear is kind of my specialty." He stopped for a moment as Meadows entered and knelt before the grate. "It shouldn't be hard in this case. As you pointed out, Mercy is rather stupid. Actually she was never injured in an accident, but she was rather badly injured about the head and face. Sister Martha Gratia was right when she said Garfield had a rather brutal face. The doctor believed she was beaten. Did I forget to mention that the doctor was a plastic surgeon? Oh! I beg your pardon!"

His clumsy gesture had brushed against a large vase on the mantel. The vase tottered and fell with a crash, missing the kneeling Meadows by mere inches. She jerked herself aside with a cry, then peered up at Tweede, her eyes wide and her face contorted. "You did that on purpose, you little shrimp!" she shouted. "How did you know . . ." The words were abruptly cut off as she gazed wildly about at each of them in turn.



"Mercy?" Faith murmured, peering at the taut, angry face. "Is that really you?"

"What do you mean?" the woman snarled. "Mercy who? I don't know anyone named Mercy."

"You weren't married to Garfield?" Faith challenged. "You didn't run off and leave him? You didn't call yourself . . ."

"I tell you, I don't know anyone named Mercy Pleasance."

"Then how do you know the name now?" Tweede asked. "She died before you came here, and her name is never mentioned. Never mind. You can change your name and your face, but your fingerprints will still be the same. And the doctor will remember, I should think. So long as everyone here thought you were dead, you were perfectly safe. But now that they know you're not dead, it won't be difficult to prove who you are. Garfield taught you to drive, didn't he? Did he take the Chrysler that afternoon? Did you go with him and drink Irish whisky? The tire marks aren't clear, but they could match. Your prints will be on the steering wheel. And, of course, you won't have Mr. Albright to cover up for you this time."

"He didn't cover up for me!" screamed Meadows. "He covered up for Garfield! What I did, I did on my own. Our father, that son of a bitch, killed Mother. He killed her! And she was the only human one of the lot. But I paid him back. I'm just sorry he never knew it was me. And Pete! I swore I'd get back at him for that. And I found those notes. Well, I made sure *he* knew. 'Remember Mercy Pleasance?' I shouted just before I ran him down. Oh, he knew! But nothing else went right. Nothing ever went right. For them, sure. But never for me. Never for me." She began to sob—deep, throaty gasping sobs—eyes closed, hands over her face. That was when Ramirez entered very quietly and led her out, still sobbing.

"Please go away, Mr. Tweede," Dr. Albright said. "You'll be paid, but I don't want to see you any more. I did what you told me to do and I'm sorry now. It was too cruel."

"You said you wanted to find out the truth."

"I was mistaken. For once, I was mistaken. Go away, Mr. Tweede."

Tweede went.

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# The Rust on the Moon



by J. P. Boyd

**I** was born into the half-and-half generation of organized crime, inheriting blood money and a niche in the family but educated to be legit, an accountant rather than a thief. When he was young, my father broke arms and collected protection money, ran numbers, and stood watch at the don's castle, but when I was young,

he had become the middle-aged president of a mob-owned but legitimate warehouse business, and I, in time, became his accountant. As a child, I was bored by the same schools, played the same games, and heard the same stern parental lectures on ethics and responsibility as my classmates, whose fathers were postmen, machin-

ists, and clerks. But I always knew that my father was in the mob. Even though I knew as little of the killing and vice as of the dark side of the moon, I knew he was part of the elite who had seen through the emptiness of paycheck and gold watch to take what he wanted from life. And although my means were different—a degree in accounting instead of pipe and fist—I wanted to be one of the takers, too.

Until I saw the dead girl on the sofa.

Besides my dad, the other great influence on my childhood was my high school science teacher, Harry Bateman. He was a tall, greyhaired man with a stoop who was all too obviously one of life's givers, in the best and the worst senses of the word. At the same time that I sneered at him for being weak and living in a ratty, fourth floor apartment on a salary little larger than my allowance, I respected him because he cared about his students. He was the only one other than my father who made me feel special.

One night, he invited a group of us over to peer through the telescope, and I alone came. The irony amused me: I, the worldly sophisticate, peering at the moon while my buddies were drinking and having fun. But as the black shadow slowly devoured the crescent of yellow,

it seemed that I had chosen the better part.

"The dark rust red is the shadow of the earth," he told me as I squinted at the eclipse. "A little sunlight is scattered by the dust in the air so that the shadow isn't completely black. But it's the long wavelengths, the red, that bend around the edge of the atmosphere, just as the sky is tinged with red at dawn and sunset." The shadow grew until only a tiny sliver of light remained; the eclipse was partial, but ninety-eight percent of the moon was veiled in reddish darkness. In spite of myself, I was mesmerized.

Afterwards, we stayed up half the night drinking pop, munching, and talking. Harry was lonely, and Neanderthal Man was one of his many other obsessions. "The red on the moon was blood to the caveman. How frightened he must have been, seeing the bright disc dissolve in blood."

I snickered. "And made up a story about demons or spirits to explain it."

His face distorted by refraction in his glass, Harry looked at me solemnly. "No. In his world, there were no words to even frame the question, Paul. It would have seemed blasphemous even to ask why. And yet we stubborn humans have never stopped asking, and now the moon—we *walk* on it."

Harry taught me much about asking questions before I graduated. I liked to think that the curious, inquiring mind that was his legacy had helped me compile my brilliant academic record, and so become my father's C.P.A. and treasurer. Although I was only on the fringes of the crime culture, I nonetheless kept the sense of belonging to an elite. The world was neatly divided into sheep and lions, and tooling around the city in my Mercedes, I felt more and more leonine every day. The arrogance kept building until it was time for my third annual report on Klein Storage Company.

I went to the penthouse in person to drop off the collection of pie charts and ledger sheets. Pete Rogalbutto was high in the family, but I never knew more about him except that he collected the paperwork. As I smoothed down my mane and rang the doorbell, I felt as though Peter and I were almost brothers, fellow travelers in the leonine elite. I was insufferably smug, and wrong.

Rogalbutto was eating expensive pastry and sipping wine when I was ushered into his living room. He waved away my thick report. "My people will read that. I want a layman's interpretation. How'd you do?"

In twenty minutes I explained: a good year, not great,

with a few minor hassles that depressed the bottom line.

Rogalbutto nodded expansively, reached for another pastry, and knocked his wine all over my pants.

I stood up as if shot, and Rogalbutto shook his head. "Too bad. Earl—" he turned to the burly black bodyguard who had stood with folded arms throughout our whole conversation—"give Mr. Eads some funds from petty cash to pay for a new suit." He turned to me. "Sorry, kid. I shouldn't eat so much, but I have to keep myself fit in the gym, you know?" He was in his early forties, hair just beginning to recede, but he did look as strong as a rutting bull, which was rather how he thought of himself. "The workouts make me hungry enough to eat the furniture. Uh, why don't you take yourself through the sitting room to the spare bath and dry off?"

I complied, but on my way back I opened the wrong door and found myself in a little study. And there she was, sitting on the sofa. She had been shot once in the stomach and had bled until her whole abdomen was soaked with blood. And yet she had not slumped sideways, but was upright with her head lolled back against the cushions.

The most horrible shock was that she didn't look like a



hooker. The white sweater and matching pleated skirt, flats, and white stockings were attractive but not very fashionable. Her hair, a nondescript brown, fell almost to her shoulders—neat, but a working girl's style, the hair and clothes of a woman who had only limited time and money to look pretty. And her face—she was neither pretty nor homely, but had the girl-next-door kind of attractiveness I had always found irresistible. But the blood that soaked her skirt and her sweater was already dried, and she had been dead for hours.

I have no conscious memory of staggering back to the living room, but Rogalbuto saw the shock on my face and laughed. "You've met our guest, I see."

"What? She's *dead*. Someone shot her and left her to—we've got to call the police. We—" I felt a hard slap and then suddenly found myself sitting on the couch with Rogalbuto looking down on me.

He spoke very softly, as if afraid of eavesdroppers, but I saw the flint in his eyes and suddenly was very afraid. "You're not going to be difficult about this, are you?"

I looked at the Oriental rugs, the ravaged pastry tray, the wine, trying to avoid those terrible eyes. I stammered, "The shock. I was so surprised—"

He shook me hard, then a sec-

ond time, gently. "Are you going to be difficult?"

I took a deep breath and forced myself to sit upright and meet his gaze. "My father was in the business twenty years before I was born. Don't be stupid."

Rogalbuto smiled, but did not turn his eyes. "Don't be stupid, he says, Earl. Don't be stupid. Your old man was a real stand-up guy, you know, kid? I wouldn't want to be disappointed in his son."

"You won't be. It took me six years to become a C.P.A. I learned how to add real well, Mr. Rogalbuto."

He patted me on the back softly, sat down on the couch opposite mine, and calmly began to eat another pastry.

"Help yourself, kid. Then—" but the phone interrupted him. It was a long conversation, but I simply sat there, shaken, until I saw the bodyguard eyeing me suspiciously. I forced myself to choke down a fragment of turnover, numbly. In my mind, all I could see was the girl shudder with the shock of the bullet and then collapse, to lie like a coat stacked on furniture while her life oozed away.

I had seen gunshot death once before. I was thirteen and my father had taken me out of school for three days to accompany some family bigshots to a deer hunt in Maine. He had



tried so desperately hard that weekend—desperate to show me off, desperate to impress the others with his skill with a gun, desperate to ingratiate himself with the crime czars. And I saw a couple of deer and three harmless woodchucks shudder with the impact and then simply drop, not the heroic dying of the movies but a sudden, instantaneous collapse.

And later, when I was home from college and he was telling me how glad he was to be out of it, to be in legitimate business, I asked him, "Why did you stay so long?" He knew that his efforts to raise me to be better than himself had been almost too successful; I was ashamed of his days as a thug, and he knew it, and was trying to please me. But the embarrassment on his face suddenly reminded me that I had seen that same look eight years before on the cold autumn day when he had been trying to justify the deer-killing to my impatient, adolescent intolerance. Embarrassed, but not remorseful. Because he loved being a crook. He loved being part of the family, he loved being taken to Maine by men who could buy and sell whole cities. And I realized, eating pastry on that sofa, that I loved it, too. Not his blue-collar world of broken arms and frightened shopkeepers, but my own sanitized version inhab-

ited by double-entry ledgers, laundering the takings from drugs and prostitution, but a mob C.P.A.

Before Rogalbuto's call was finished, a UPS man appeared with a trunk on a dolly. "Where's the package?"

Rogalbuto stuck his head out of the bedroom, still holding the phone. "In the study. Show him, Earl."

"Boss, I have strict instructions—"

Rogalbuto turned up his palms in a gesture of surrender. "All right. Eads, you show him where she is."

I stood up in shock, and Rogalbuto saw my white face and just stared. Numbly, I nodded, and led the man in the UPS uniform back to the study.

The messenger looked at the body and sighed. "Too bad." Then he turned to me and grinned. "Pete's parties're getting wilder and wilder, eh? Come on, it'll take both of us to lift her in."

I no more wanted to touch her cold flesh than frozen, skin-sticking metal, but I reached down and grabbed her ankles while the pseudo-UPS man reached under her armpits and we dumped her in.

I followed the coffin back into the living room just as Rogalbuto stuck his head out again. "We're all done, Eads. Tell your father he's doing okay, but we'd

like a little more next year.”

I thought: they always want a little more. How had my father endured it, year after year?

“Oh, and Earl, tell the maid that I spilled wine on the sofa, and give her a little extra to take care of the spots.”

But there were no spots; when she was shot, the girl had been sitting, and had simply sunk deeper into the cushions. Her skirt and sweater, bought on sale at a discounter's where thousands of other secretaries and clerks shopped for work clothes, had drunk her blood, and there was no trace that she had ever existed except for the trunk now moving to quiet, anonymous disposal.

When I came home, I went upstairs to my room and cried like a baby. When my father returned for dinner, my mother sent him up to talk to me. Blubbing, I told him everything. With a face like stone, he tried to help.

“I don't know why she was killed either, Paul. Or who she was. Or why Pete the Shark would have a nice girl like that around. But, Paul, you have to understand, you don't ask. Never! That's the kind of business we're in.

“I had a friend, a real buddy of mine, named Micky Rorke. Maybe he liked to talk a little too much in his beer. Boast

about his take-downs. One day, he turned up in an abandoned house with four bullets in the back of the head. And I never even asked who gave the order to shut him up. I never even asked. Because that's the kind of business we're in.”

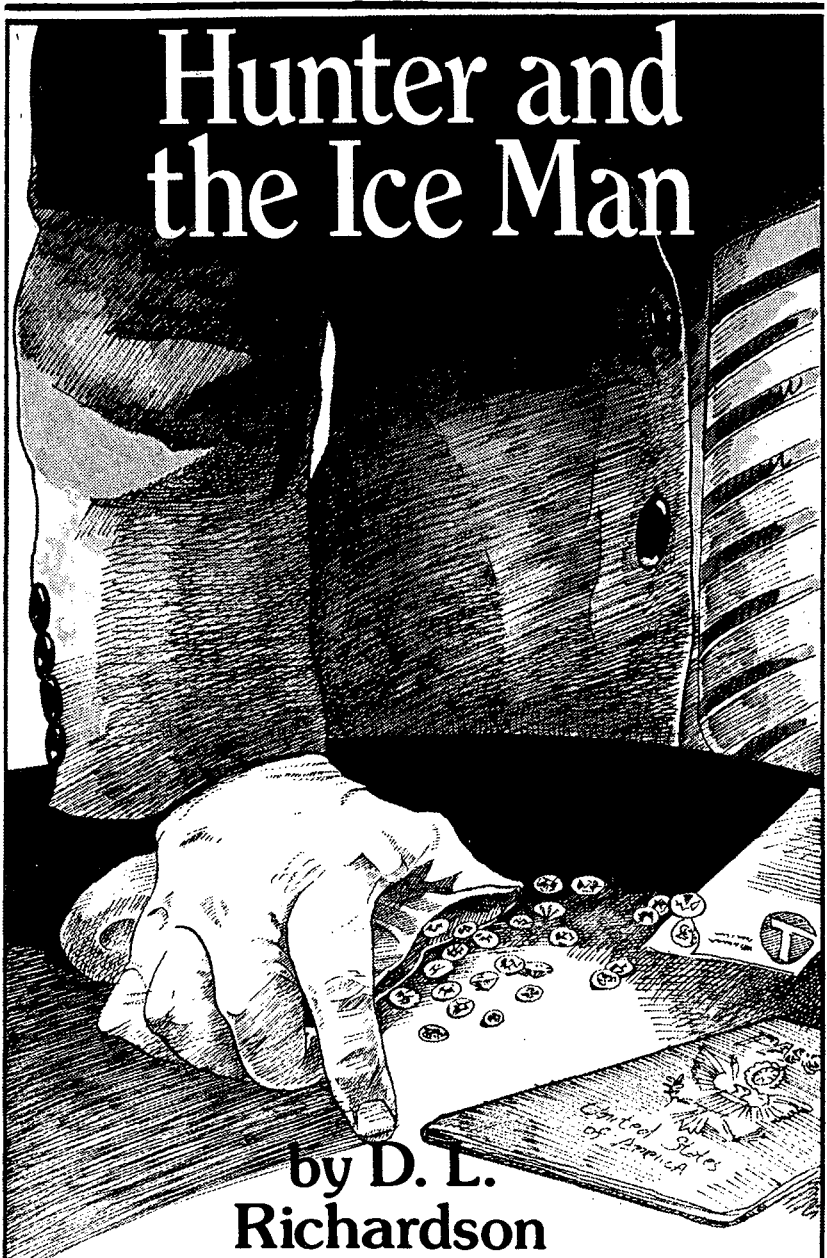
I thought of Harry Bateman's caveman gaping at the rusty, darkening moon—he, too, afraid to ask—and made my decision. The family approved my ambition to better myself with an M.B.A., but my leave of absence gave my father an excuse to replace me, and before my diploma was even dry, I went to the West Coast and took an enormous pay cut.

And so I walked forward forty thousand years, and tried to pretend that the rust on the moon was only a shadow. But Pete the Shark remained in the world of glaciers, mammoths, and flint-tipped spears. He was found in a burned-out car in upstate New York only a year after the woman's death. As Harry had said long before, “In the Stone Age, the average lifespan was less than thirty.” Someone else agreed that Pete had outlived his time.

Once again, the world was filled with questions. Among them: who *was* she? And why was she killed? But the only questions that were ever answered were about myself.

FICTION

# Hunter and the Ice Man



by D. L.  
**Richardson**

Illustration by Jim Ceribello

CERIBELLO

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**F**rom my vantage point in the glassed-in portion of the loft serving as the manager's office, I could see Tyler sitting on one of the slatted benches offered by the mall for weary shoppers and bored husbands. My secretary had informed me that if I was going to drag her out—her words, not mine—drag her out on a case during her lunch hour, the least I could do was treat her to frozen yogurt. That sounded fair enough to me until she ordered the large size with a topping of chocolate chips.

I thought yogurt was diet food for the body, not the wallet, and I made the mistake of saying so, plus throwing in something about not realizing that chocolate chips had become part of the calorie conscious crowd's diet. One of her famous killer smiles preceded the sweet reminder to watch my back at all times. I was still grinning about that one when I entered the jewelry store and asked to see the manager.

As I watched, Tyler yawned dramatically, patting her hand over her mouth with ladylike delicacy, and then consulted her watch. Never once did she so much as glance my way. She wasn't fooling me.

"Sorry for the interruption, Mr. Hunter."

Craig Mattson reentered his

office, if one can call an area just big enough for a desk, two chairs, and a surprisingly realistic artificial tree an office. The only path to his chair was between me and the plate glass wall, and his well-dressed body blocked my view just about the time I thought I was getting a feel for Tracey's radar or ESP or witchcraft or whatever you want to call it. I tried not to sound annoyed.

"I know you have a lot of lunch hour shoppers."

His manager's smile was firmly in place as he settled into his upholstered chair. "The Christmas business seems to be starting early this year."

I could have sworn I saw the gleam of dollar signs in the green eyes set in a tanned, unlined face. I know I heard the hi-tech sound of computerized cash registers beeping their way to higher profits and emptier pocketbooks.

"Lexington's newest crop of young upwardly mobiles anxious to spend their money to make an impression," I observed.

He chuckled politely and couldn't resist a glance down at the dressed-for-success clientele. "Diamonds and gold never seem to go out of style. Fortunately." He stroked his upper lip like a man who has had a mustache or who is contem-

plating acquiring one.

I decided Mattson's visions of sugar plums had lasted long enough.

"Do you have any questions about the report?" I nodded toward the manila envelope on his desk.

He shrugged with an air of unconcern. "I don't think so."

He had given the neatly typed pages little more than a perfunctory glance. I wasn't sure how Tyler would feel about having her work so carelessly disregarded, but I was beginning to get a little ticked. Employee checks on six unassuming employees was no big deal, but he could at least have been polite enough to read the report.

He continued. "I assume that everyone checked out okay." He had the decency to put a little bit of a question mark into his voice.

"Not so much as a speeding ticket among them."

He smiled. "You have confirmed what I already knew to be true. But you know how owners can be sometimes. They read of one case of an employee ripping off a business and heading for South America and they immediately get nervous." It was the same reason he had given when he hired me.

"At least this should give them some peace of mind."

"Until the bulk of our Christ-

mas stock arrives, and then they'll probably get nervous all over again and hire someone to redo the security." He shrugged. "It's their money, not mine."

It was my turn to smile politely.

Mattson stood. I followed suit. I can take a hint.

"Thank you for your time, Mr. Hunter. I really do appreciate it." His handshake was firm, but hasty. "Your check will go in the mail this afternoon."

Tyler had finished her yogurt and was browsing through the remaining Thanksgiving cards in the adjacent card shop. She fell into step beside me.

"Well, was Mr. Charm satisfied?" she asked.

I looked at her sideways. "You didn't tell me you knew Craig Mattson."

"I don't. I was in the store with Yvonne when she bought her niece a graduation gift." Yvonne was Tyler's neighbor. "He practically fell all over himself trying to be witty and charming." She made a little face.

Outside we waited for the LexTran bus to roar off, leaving its diesel scent hanging, before we crossed to the row where I had parked. A warm breeze, more like April than November, tousled Tyler's short dark hair. In Kentucky sometimes

summer melts gracefully into fall, which breezes just as gracefully into winter, and sometimes it goes from late summer and short sleeves one day to dead of winter and where's-my-wool-coat the next. It can be hard on the system, but it certainly makes life interesting.

"Something's bothering you," she said.

"I guess I just have a hard time dealing with the idea that I've done background checks on employees who have all been there at least four years without even a hint of impropriety."

Tyler raised an eyebrow. I think it was my use of the word "impropriety." "The owners needed reassurance. You gave it to them."

I held the door for her and admired the graceful way she maneuvered into the front seat. Not to mention the show of legs as she swiveled them around from the pavement to the floorboard.

"But what about Mattson? He's only been there two years. And what about the part-time help they'll hire for Christmas season? That's where your biggest security risks are."

Tyler peered up at me, those hazel eyes of hers doing their usual number on me. "Maybe the owners hired someone else to investigate Mattson. And

maybe the part-time help doesn't have free access to everything."

"Maybe." I looked back at the brick facade of the mall.

"Come on, Hunter. It was an easy case and the customer is satisfied, so you should be, too. End of story. And speaking of stories, you have one to finish and I have filing to do before I can go home and finish getting out my winter clothes. So, if you don't mind, I'd like to get back to the office sometime today."

"Winter clothes? How can you be thinking sweaters and wool when the weather is this gorgeous and the weatherman has said that it will last another week to ten days?" I gestured toward the blue sky.

"A lot he knows." She pulled the car door shut with a resounding slam.

**I** tell myself that if I live to be a hundred I'll never figure out how she does that.

Then I tell myself that she grew up in Kentucky and that she's one of the more observant people I know, not to mention intelligent, and that it makes sense she would have a feel for changes in the weather.

The pedestrians on Vine Street, their shoulders hunched, their hands shoved into coat pockets, were wasting no time getting to their destinations. A guy at the bus stop jiggled on



first one foot and then the other while he huffed into his cupped bare hands.

I shook my head. If I live to be a hundred. Tyler entered the office and closed the door behind her, her gaze sweeping across the littered surface of my desk. I started to defend myself and my fruitless morning of writing.

"You have a visitor." Even had the door been open, her voice would not have carried to the outer office.

"Animal, vegetable, or mineral?"

"Try irate employee. It's Liza West."

A bad feeling began creeping up my spine.

"Show her in."

I was standing behind my desk when Tyler ushered in Liza West. I didn't think her flushed face and glittering eyes had anything to do with the climb up the flight of stairs to the office. The young woman in front of me was angry, and I had the feeling that the bad start to my day was going to look great compared to what was to come.

"Miss West, I'm Adam Hunter." I extended my hand across the desk.

"I know who you are," she snapped.

I withdrew my hand and shot a glance at Tyler, but all I got

from her was raised eyebrows.

"How can I help you, Miss West?" Staying calm in the face of someone else's anger is an excellent step toward defusing the situation. I read that somewhere.

"You can start by telling me where you get off prying into other people's private lives."

"I'm sorry. I don't understand."

Which wasn't completely true. I had never met her, but I knew Liza West. Two days before, I had presented her employer with the results of the background checks I had done on his six full-time employees, of whom she was one. What I didn't understand was how she knew about a confidential investigation and why she was so upset. The information on her barely filled three-quarters of a page.

"Are you denying that Craig Mattson hired you to investigate my past?"

"I'm not denying or confirming anything." Standard nothing answer.

But I was getting more curious by the minute. So was Tyler.

"You don't have to. He showed me your report." Misty tears threatened angry eyes. "Right before he threatened to fire me." She tossed her long blonde hair behind her shoulders and clamped her jaws shut.

Now I was really confused. I glanced at Tyler and took a little comfort from the fact that she apparently didn't understand any of this either.

"Why would he threaten to fire you?"

"Don't play innocent with me. Once he saw that I had been arrested for shoplifting he was ready to show me the door. Never mind that I was fifteen years old at the time and that I have had a spotless record since then."

Tyler was frowning. Probably because she was beginning to smell the same skunk I was.

"Miss West, I did not tell Mr. Mattson that you had been arrested for shoplifting."

"Now you're playing word games with me. It was in the report you gave him. I know. I read it."

"Tracey, would you get the Mattson file for me?"

I don't know why I bothered. She was already halfway toward the filing cabinets.

What I was about to do was, strictly speaking, unethical, but I had some questions of my own for the nearly hysterical woman standing in front of me with clenched fists, and until I convinced her that her anger was misdirected, I would have a hard time getting any answers.

Tyler handed me the folder and then stood next to me. I

pulled out the appropriate page and extended it across the desk.

"You can see for yourself. There is nothing in that report about a shoplifting charge."

She eyed the two of us with suspicion before snatching the typed paper as if afraid we might try to take it back. Her eyes darted back and forth across the page. She looked up at us, suspicion giving way to confusion. There was room enough in the club for one more confused party. She reread the report, more slowly this time.

I shifted just enough so that my arm pressed against Tyler's. Moral support is a wonderful thing. Her perfume isn't too bad either.

Finally, Liza looked up. "This is some kind of trick. You're not showing me the real report." She didn't sound convinced.

"You are holding the real report in your hand. Ms. Tyler typed it. She can confirm its contents."

Liza directed her gaze at Tyler, who, as far as I could tell, didn't move a muscle, but Liza saw something because the fight went out of her.

"I don't understand." Her eyes came back to me.

"Neither do I, quite frankly."

The sheet of paper was shaking when she handed it back to me. "You mean you didn't know about the shoplifting?"

"I knew. I just didn't include it in the report."

"But why?"

"As you said, you were fifteen years old."

Liza said in a fragile voice, "It was a stupid thing to do."

"Doing stupid things is part of being a teenager. Fortunately, most people outgrow it." I looked at Tyler and dared her to make a comment. "You've been a model, law-abiding citizen since then, so I saw no reason to include it. I made a judgment call. Sometimes I show bad judgment—" I didn't dare look at Tyler on that one—but I don't think this was one of those times."

"I really don't know what to say." Without the anger to support her, she was starting to lose her courage and her control. "I'm sorry."

"So am I. If you've got time for a few questions, maybe we can make Mr. Mattson even sorrier."

**"I** liked the part about sometimes showing bad judgment." Tyler reentered the office after walking Liza to the top of the stairs. "Too bad I don't have that on tape."

"Life is hard."

I knew what she was trying to do. Trouble was, I wasn't sure even Tyler could do much to

ease the tension that had settled over the office. I was well on my way to working up a good mad.

"It won't do you any good to get angry, you know."

There she went again, reading my mind, although this time it probably wasn't too difficult.

"Oh, I don't know. I haven't punched anybody out lately, and everyone knows that any private investigator worth his salt punches out at least one person a week."

She was grinning at me, and I had to grin back. Damn, if she hadn't done it again. I relaxed in my chair.

"Okay, so getting mad isn't all it's cracked up to be."

She perched sideways on the front edge of my desk. "Mad is what brought Liza West here. Otherwise, you'd never know about Mattson's little game."

"And what little game is that?"

"I forgot." She stood up. "I'm just the secretary. I'll go call Agnes."

She stopped just short of slamming the door on her way out. Barely.

I know. It was rotten of me. But how else do you get even with someone who's right and who reads your mind like it was the Sunday paper?

I put my feet up on the desk.

I had suggested to Liza that she might want to contact a lawyer, but that idea seemed to frighten her. Some people, even if they are completely honest, are not comfortable with the idea of retaining an attorney. Too much television, I guess.

I gave her Agnes Braggaducci's name and number and promised to call Agnes myself to apprise her of the situation.

If you're uncomfortable around lawyers to begin with, your first meeting with Agnes can be a little overwhelming. At an even five feet, she's a fifty-year-old spitfire who takes no guff and calls a spot a spot and not a blemish. She's also one heck of an attorney. She says it's overcompensation for her diminutive size and her gender. I say it's because of her crafty intelligence and her competitive spirit.

Whatever, she passes some business along to me, and I pass some business along to her. Tyler says I get the better end of that deal.

I tapped the business end of my pen on the notepad. Mattson certainly hadn't wasted any time. No wonder he wasn't in any rush to read my report. The little zit already knew about the shoplifting charge. If it wasn't part of my report, he had plans to make it so.

My first impulse to go back

to the store and make him eat some of his inventory was looking better all the time. Trouble was, I'd never find out what he was up to if I did that, and the idea of revenge appealed to me almost as much as the idea of inflicting bodily harm.

"You're smiling."

"Geeze, Tyler! Don't sneak up on me like that!" My heart rate could have qualified for the Indy 500.

"I didn't sneak up on you. You were just too engrossed in plotting some fiendish revenge to hear me. I called Agnes and explained the situation. At least, what little I know of it."

I let that go by. Tyler continued.

"She said she'd explain the legal options to Liza. I think she was scenting a lawsuit. But she promised to talk to you before she started anything."

"I want to make a stab at catching Mattson at his own game."

"She figured as much."

Tyler headed for the door.

I frowned. "Don't you want to hear my plan?"

She paused long enough to say, "I'm just the secretary. Those kinds of things are out of my league." The door stayed open this time.

She wasn't fooling me. I knew she wanted to know what I had in mind. I also knew that she

figured I'd be so hot to tell her that I'd follow her to her office. I threw a self-satisfied glance at the open doorway. I'd show her.

I lasted ten minutes.

“You know that first urge you had to go smash that twerp's face?” Tyler stretched her legs out on the office couch. “It's looking better all the time.”

I grinned. “What's the matter, Tyler? Has Mr. Charm suddenly developed eyes for someone else?”

“I swear, Hunter; the next time he feels the need to stand in my face to tell me about the great job I'm doing, I'm going to punch him right in his toothpaste smile.”

She moved her feet long enough for me to sit on the opposite end of the couch and then deposited them in my lap. I tried to adopt a serious look as I began to massage her left foot.

“I'm sure you are doing a job worthy of praise.”

“Oh, sure. Cleaning glass showcases requires all kinds of skill.”

“When do you work next?”

“Tomorrow night. Six to nine.”

“I'll take you out to an early dinner.”

“It will cost you more than frozen yogurt. Working two jobs

is not my idea of a good time.”

“We'll go around the corner to O'Leary's for lasagna.” I started massaging her right foot. “How's Liza holding up?”

“She's fine until what's-his-face comes around.” Tracey sighed. “I'd swear he's enjoying tormenting her.”

The background check I was doing on Mattson had turned up an ex-wife who, over the phone, had told me in no uncertain terms that the little weasel was her mistake of a lifetime and she had no desire whatsoever to mention his name, much less talk about him. Even hinting that I was trying to nail him for something illegal didn't loosen her up for anything more than the existence of a mistress, who, by now, could have been replaced. She hung up on me. I didn't know if it would help, but at least she gave me a name before she rattled my eardrum.

“We could probably get him for harassment,” Tyler said. “Or rather, Agnes probably could.”

“Maybe. But at best it would only mean a small financial settlement for Liza, and the owners might find a way to fire her anyway. Catching him with his hand in the cookie jar would be a lot more fun.”

“Not to mention putting him behind bars for a while.”

I smiled. "Not to mention."

"You really think all this is part of a plan to help himself to some inventory?"

"If he was trying for sexual blackmail, he would have made his move by now." I shook my head. "This guy is planning for an exceptionally nice Christmas, and Liza is going to be his fall guy."

"Straight from shoplifter to jewel thief in one giant leap. How long would the police buy that?"

"Long enough." I remembered something Mattson had said the day I gave him my report. A throwaway line, really. "Tyler, get on the phone to the travel agencies and see if Mattson has made any travel plans for the near future for points south."

"Any point south in particular?"

"South America."

"You do know that travel agencies don't just hand out that information to anyone who asks."

"Be creative."

"You mean lie."

"Whatever works."

**T**he murmur of Tracey's voice came through the open doorway from the outer office. I glanced at my watch. If she didn't have any luck pretty soon, she'd have

to finish making her calls tomorrow morning. I wasn't entirely comfortable with that idea. Mattson couldn't afford to let Liza stew and fret too long. People who stew and fret too long become unpredictable. I myself wasn't sure how long she could hold up.

When Liza told me the store was already hiring seasonal help, I convinced Tyler to apply. Her presence, even on a part-time basis, would help Liza, and she had already come up with the name of Mattson's newest girlfriend. I was confident Tracey would get the job. All the female employees were attractive. It was a cinch that was no cosmic fluke. And I'd put Tracey, with her penetrating hazel eyes and her dazzling smile, up against them any day.

She had looked only slightly disgusted when I asked if she knew anything about jewelry and had given me her best sugary smile and Southern accent when she said, "I may not know jewelry, but I know what I like."

I'd seen enough of Tyler's jewelry to know that she and/or someone else had excellent taste. She never wore a lot, but what she wore whispered of big bucks.

For the time being I was content with the little I knew about Tyler's life before she came into mine. Like the jewelry. And the



expensive townhouse. (I know. I priced them when they first came on the market.) The apparent fact that she didn't have to work. Any-time access to a beachfront house on Sanibel Island in Florida. And something else, something she'd lost.

"Our Mr. Mattson has been a busy little boy," Tyler said as her heels clicked across the wooden floor.

I shook free of my reverie. "How so?"

"He has contacted four different travel agencies and made four different reservations with—"

"Let me guess. Four different destinations."

"And Newman says you've got the instincts of a rock."

"Detective Sergeant Newman is the one with the instincts of a rock. Sounds as though our friend is going to be busy."

"If he uses all these, he's going to need clones." She consulted her list, needlessly I'm sure. "I called the biggest agency in town first. He made a plane reservation with them for Dallas with a stop in Atlanta and a connection to Mexico City."

"Any hotel reservations in Mexico City?"

She shook her head. "Nada."

That didn't surprise me. From Atlanta or Dallas/Fort Worth he could catch a plane to any-

where. I contemplated where anywhere might be.

"Do you want to hear the rest, or are you just going to sit there and stare into space?"

"Go ahead. I'm listening."

"The next reservation I found was for Miami, where he's booked on a two-week Caribbean cruise, which, by the way, includes the Cayman Islands and their marvelous little secret bank accounts. He also has a reservation for New York and on to Amsterdam and a reservation for Los Angeles, final destination Hong Kong."

"No South America."

"Not that I could find. It gets more interesting, though."

"Can I stand the excitement?"

"The L.A. to Hong Kong reservation was booked through a travel agency in Louisville."

"Louisville?"

"His way of helping the economy by spreading his business around."

"No doubt." If I wasn't going to ask her why, after striking paydirt the first time, she had gone on to call other agencies, I certainly wasn't going to ask what made her call agencies in Louisville. "Any other good news?"

"Two things. First, all of those tickets were charged to his charge card."

"Which means that they're

easily traceable, which means he's probably got other reservations under another name or names from any or all of those connection points."

"Easy to do if you pay cash and know ahead of time when you'll be arriving."

I sighed. "What's the other good news?"

"All the reservations are for the day after tomorrow."

"Damn."

"It could be worse. It could be tomorrow." Her face didn't look much like she thought it could be worse.

I had expected him to move quickly, but I was still shaken. I didn't like the idea of Mattson's getting away, and I liked even less the idea that I had helped him with his escape plan. Newman would have a field day with that one.

"Do you want me to call Charlie?" she asked.

Charlie Whisk is a computer wizard extraordinaire. What he's still doing in Lexington I'll never know. But, then, I guess I do. He's not into money, the closest he comes to materialism is his love of computers and stereo equipment, and he's never been great about obeying rules, which doesn't exactly make him corporate material no matter how brilliant he is. Said disdain for rules is why he does jobs for me every now and then with the

same kind of savor I've seen on the faces of gourmets sitting down to an exceptional seven-course meal. It's scary sometimes.

"Have him check the airline flight schedules. Give him Mattson's arrival times in Atlanta, New York, L.A., and Dallas/Fort Worth and have him check for flights to South America that would be easy connections."

"The flight to L.A. goes through Chicago."

"Naturally." I shook my head and sighed. "Add Chicago to the list." She started for the door. "And, Trace, about dinner."

"I know. I'll just add it to the growing list."

**"T**ell me again why we're doing this."  
"You mean fogging up the windows?"

"Quit trying to be cute, Hunter."

I grinned out the window on my side of the car. By the time I looked back at Tyler huddled in the other front seat I had a decently serious look on my face.

"We're doing this because we don't want Mattson to get away scot free, we don't want Liza to get arrested and have to go through the trauma of proving herself innocent, and we don't

want to look like idiots for helping him get away with it."

"I had nothing to do with the idiot part," she pointed out.

"Where's your sense of loyalty, Tyler? Your company spirit?"

"Back home in a nice warm bed."

"I tell you what. We'll give it another two hours, and if he's still here, I'll take you home."

"Promises, promises," she muttered.

I shifted again, trying to find a comfortable position, but I think I had used them all up in the last four hours. I checked the street again.

Charlie had done his magic computer act and come up with New York and Miami as the best bets for a quick connecting flight to South America.

"I assume that you're hot on the trail of some nefarious type intent upon eluding the authorities and his day in court," Charlie had said over the phone.

I could picture him in what he called his workroom—"Would anybody in his right mind call this mess an office?"—feet propped up on the edge of his desk.

"Something like that."

"Well, then, I assume you realize that any of the original destinations would be good places for nefarious types to get lost."

"Too risky."

"Under one's own name, but not under an alias. Maybe with a little help from a disguise?"

"Come out with it, Charlie."

He went on to convince me that with the aid of his computer and an assistant who was a whiz at probabilities he could, given the right background information, which he was sure I could provide, come up with a darn good guess about an alias, "five at the most, old pal."

I had my doubts, but Charlie was chomping at the bit—"I want to try out this new program I've cooked up"—and while it wouldn't help me catch Mattson, in the event he did pull off his scheme, names would help the police track him down. Without them, Mattson could be long gone before the cops had time to turn around twice.

"Did you say something, Tyler?"

"No. You must be hearing the gears in your brain grinding."

She was colder than I'd thought. I checked the street again. After I hung up with Charlie, an upset Liza called. Mattson had approached her as she was preparing to leave work. It was pay-back time. He didn't elaborate, but told her not to make plans for anything other than work the next day.

Some creative lying helped reassure Liza that the situation

was under control. I looked across the car at my secretary, her eyelashes resting on her cheeks. She had talked to Liza, too, and told her that she'd be coming to work earlier than scheduled. When I asked how she planned to do that without arousing suspicion, she just smiled at me. I should know better than to ask dumb questions.

I went back to surveying the street. Fortunately for us, Charlie had a friend who lived near Mattson and was willing to let us use his driveway as a vantage point. It made the job a lot easier. Lexington is not New York, where two people can park on a street for four hours and never raise an eyebrow.

"Bingo!"

Tyler's eyes flew open. "You don't have to shout. I'm not standing across the street."

"Our boy is about to make a move." I could feel my muscles tensing.

She straightened up in the seat and frowned in the direction of Mattson's house, where the garage door was slowly lowering itself.

"If he goes to the neighborhood grocery for milk, you're dead, Hunter."

When Mattson's car rolled out of his driveway and turned onto the street, I relaxed and

allowed myself a smile.

"Wrong direction for milk, Tyler."

Two consecutive nights of surveillance from a cold car were not doing wonderful things for my disposition or my health or my joints. Somehow it always looked easier on television. But then those guys were always somewhere like California or Hawaii, not Kentucky. And they didn't have to sit and watch an unseasonable snowfall begin with gentle persistence.

I didn't even have Tyler to keep me company. She was busy taking care of Liza. That left me with Mr. Craig Mattson, ambitious jewelry store manager looking to open his own branch office in South America. Where it was warm. The little creep.

I checked my watch in the glow from one of the automatic security lights in the shopping mall's back parking lot. A small group of women crossed the main parking area to the employee lot. Hands shoved deep into coat pockets, they talked among themselves, probably about the oversized fluffy snowflakes.

I glanced in my rear view mirror. Mattson hadn't parked his car in the employee lot when he returned from his sup-

per break, leaving it instead in a slot close to the rear entrance. Just then he left from the rear of the mall, and I resisted the urge to sit up straighter for a better view. He swung his briefcase with a jaunty air as he approached his car. Snowflakes danced in the light bath drenching his car and settled briefly on his shoulders as he locked the briefcase in the trunk of the sedan.

"Taking some work home with you, pal?" I said softly to myself.

I eased my car in with those of departing employees, easily keeping Mattson in sight, and turned the heater on high. When he got on New Circle Road and headed west, I wasn't too concerned. There were legitimate reasons for his taking the less direct route home, and traffic on New Circle was more than adequate for tailing purposes. He could have been going to see his newest unsuspecting lady friend to tell her goodbye. Nothing I'd found out indicated she was part of his traveling plans. He might even have been headed for the house Tyler and I had followed him to the night before. Last minute preparations and reassurances and all that.

I had wanted to do some snooping then, but Tyler had pointed out the inherent advan-

tages in having the address. That was after she drew my attention to the human gorilla lurking in the shadows and the Doberman prowling the front porch. I like animals, but I prefer them friendly and lazy to two-legged or snarling.

When we passed the Harrodsburg Road off-ramp, I knew Mattson wasn't going home and he wasn't going calling. He was going south. A few hours ahead of schedule.

While the latest development threw a monkey wrench into plans A, B, and C (there was no D), at least it was nice to know that Tyler was human after all and had missed a reservation. The snow continued to fall as if it thought it was January. Charlie would be disappointed, though. He'd be looking for an alias in the wrong place. Even that was comforting. Sometimes Charlie and his computer made me uneasy.

Knowing that Mattson was headed for the airport, I dropped back farther. The steady snow was beginning to attach itself to the cold road, and I gave my brakes a quick tap. The result confirmed my suspicion that I'd best take the cloverleaf off-ramp to Versailles Road with extra caution.

Mattson was careful, too. The guy had already proved he wasn't dumb, and it was a cinch

a car accident didn't fit into his well-laid plans. On Versailles Road he stayed in the far left lane, and I, in the lane to his right, kept a couple of car lengths between us. I could almost laugh when he pulled into the airport's long term parking lot. Almost.

In the short term lot, someone had kindly left a slot close to the terminal. I jogged across to the terminal, the snow falling silently on my shoulders and already adding a Christmasy effect to the shrubbery. Rush hour tomorrow morning would not be fun.

The two sets of electric eye doors slid open and closed around me with silent efficiency. I quickly scanned the area for the best spot to park myself before Mattson arrived.

By most standards Blue Grass Airport is small. I can remember when it was even smaller. One tiny building that called to mind the word "hut." Now it's a large rectangular building. The front half is one long, open room with ticket counters at one end and restrooms and baggage claim at the other. In between are the car rental agencies and display cases. A sitting area, with its conversation clusters and requisite growing things, occupies a large portion of the space between the airline counters and the

baggage claim area. I chose a seat hidden from the entrance by a display case extolling the virtues of a specific horse farm and hidden from the ticket counters by a miniature jungle. Someone had even been thoughtful enough to leave a newspaper. Clichéd camouflage works as well as any.

In front of me to my right were the gift shop and restaurant and lounge. Directly in front of me beyond the seating area down a gentle incline was the security check. Beyond that, the gate area, another long, open room broken up only by the waiting areas and gates of the various airlines serving Lexington.

Things were pretty quiet. They usually were at that time of night. If it hadn't been so quiet, I wouldn't have heard the hushing sound of the automatic doors down in front of the ticket counters. I peered through the undergrowth.

Mattson strolled in, suitcase and briefcase in hand. At the counter he brushed the snow from the shoulders of his wool overcoat. I stayed put while he took care of business with the ticket agent, the sounds of ticket stamping echoing in the near silence. The newspaper was unnecessary. He walked casually but purposefully toward the security clearance area without



a sideways glance. Just another businessman taking just another late flight.

I let him pass through security with not a beep and disappear to the left before I sauntered over to the ticket counter to check the departure and arrival board. The agent looked at me questioningly.

I smiled and indicated the board. "It's on time."

He nodded and went back to the mysterious incessant stamping that was part of his job. I headed for the security gate. Mattson's flight to Atlanta was due to leave in twenty minutes.

I passed through the security checkpoint with a smile for the bored officers and turned to the right. In the gate area of an airline whose last flight had left at 4:04 P.M., I stood at one of the huge plate glass windows making up the wall overlooking the runways.

Muted conversations from the far end were little more than a murmur when they reached my ears. My reflection looked back at me from the window. The airport runway crew was having no problem with the early snow that would more than likely be a memory by tomorrow afternoon.

Between me and the occupied gate area was an enticing bank of telephones. But who was I

going to call? Certainly not the police. Even if they believed me—I could just hear Newman's sarcastic remarks—they couldn't get here in time. And if they did get here, what could they do?

"Probable cause, Hunter. You remember that little phrase, the criminal's best friend," Newman would say with a smug look.

Without Liza, my story was full of holes. And I had no idea where Liza was. The job of keeping her out of harm's way had been left entirely in Tyler's hands. There were several places I could try, but time wasn't exactly on my side.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Mattson approach the phones. At the same time, an airliner touched down. Mattson was giving himself all kinds of room by delaying until the last possible moment what I knew was going to be an anonymous tip to the police.

Then it hit me. The little twit was not only setting up Liza, but also whatever criminal type it was who lived in the house with the Doberman and the human gorilla. The arrival of the police would be a surprise for both of them. I took some satisfaction in knowing that Liza wouldn't be there. The other guy could take care of himself.

If the creep was going to

leave Lexington unmolested, and it looked as though he was, I could at least make him sweat a little.

Judas call completed, the quarter jingled its way into the phone company's till just as I came up behind him.

"Think it will snow?"

There it was. A startled flash of shock, recognition, and temporary panic. Brief, but nevertheless visible. I smiled with satisfaction.

Mattson had his salesman's smile on quickly, but not quickly enough. "Why, Mr. Hunter, what a surprise. What brings you to the airport?"

"The usual things that bring people to the airport."

His smile quivered at the edges, and his eyes widened ever so slightly. "Are you meeting someone?"

I kept smiling. "No."

The muscle at the corner of his eye twitched. "Oh, are you taking this flight?"

"I'm here to see off an acquaintance."

"Oh." The syllable was elongated, and the eye twitch stopped. He looked around casually, his momentarily shaken composure returning. "Anyone I know?"

"You."

He almost frowned. "I'm sorry. I don't understand."

"I think you do."

The airplane taxied up to the gate area in preparation for a passenger switch.

"Really, Mr. Hunter, I don't understand why you'd be here to see me off, or even how you'd know I was going on a business trip."

"I thought most businessmen took early morning flights."

"I have an early morning meeting."

"I didn't realize fences did business early in the morning. I thought they worked late at night in back alleys or in the back rooms of sleazy bars or grubby pawn shops or in houses protected by armed guards and dogs. But, then, maybe I've been watching too much television."

The DC-10 had completed the docking procedures that always remind me of a space movie. If any passengers were deplaning, it would happen within the next few minutes, followed closely by passenger boarding.

"Mr. Hunter, you are making absolutely no sense. And I really don't have time to play guessing games with you." He made a move to leave.

"Diamonds, Mattson. That's something you understand."

He seemed to change his mind about leaving. "It's my job to understand diamonds."

"I guess that includes understanding black market rates

and ways of illegally disposing of precious gems."

"Have you been drinking, Mr. Hunter? You're making less and less sense with everything you say." He turned toward the gate.

"I guess you figured that it would take the police a day or two to sort everything out and realize that Liza West couldn't have done it all herself. New York and Los Angeles don't have the market cornered on smart cops. You're not giving ours any credit at all."

He stopped and turned slowly back toward me. "Couldn't have done all what by herself?"

"I have to hand it to you. It was a good plan. Instead of trying to get cleanly away with it, which you knew was too unlikely even to consider, you worked out a way to give yourself time to relocate. I hear South America isn't such a bad place to live. Especially Brazil."

His eyes narrowed, and he moved back to stand in front of me. I stood up straighter, taking full advantage of my extra four inches.

"I don't know what it is you think you know, Hunter." A hint of threat eased its way into his voice.

It was getting harder to keep my smile in place. "I'm curious about what you would have done if all your employees had

had clean records." I snapped my fingers like someone who's had a sudden brainstorm. "You would have manufactured some dirt. A smart sleaze like you wouldn't have any trouble doing that. The one thing you didn't count on was Liza's coming to tell me off. My secretary was a little confused, though. She didn't remember typing anything about a shoplifting charge. You know my secretary. Tall brunette. Great legs. Terrific smile and eyes. Her name's Tracey."

His face went stone hard, and he looked at the few disembarking passengers before he spoke.

"What do you want, Hunter?" There was none of the charming salesman in his voice, just cold jewel thief.

"I'm a man of simple pleasures. The sight of you handcuffed in police custody will be enough."

He looked around again and almost smiled. "I don't see any police."

"They're on their way."

The smile crept onto his face. "I don't think so."

The gate agent, the same guy who had checked Mattson in, announced the imminent boarding of the Atlanta flight.

"Where are they, Mattson? Your suitcase? Your briefcase? Of course, they're unmounted

so they could be in the lining of your coat. You're going to look a little strange stepping off the plane in South America in a wool overcoat."

"You're on a fishing expedition, Hunter." He was grinning. "If you knew as much as you pretend to know, you'd have the cops here in force. But all you've got is hunches and circumstantial evidence and a bruised ego. Don't take it so hard, old son." He slapped me on the shoulder. "It wasn't anything personal."

He had no idea how close he came to losing his hand just then. "Just like putting Liza West through hell was nothing personal."

He shrugged. "Just think of it as survival of the fittest."

The boarding of the flight for Atlanta was announced. The passengers in the gate area reacted immediately, but without hurry. There were too few of them to hurry. Even Mattson didn't seem especially anxious.

"You won't get away with it, Mattson." Now I was beginning to sound like a bad TV program.

"But I am getting away with it, Hunter. I'm going to get on that plane and fly right out of here, and there's nothing you can do to stop me. By the time you get the police to listen to your wild story, I'll be long gone. And by the time they get

around to doing anything, I'll be sitting by the pool. Have a nice day, Hunter." He headed for the gate.

I followed. "Smuggling diamonds through customs is risky business on both ends."

He tossed a quick smile over his shoulder. "Thanks for worrying about me, Hunter."

"Phony passports can be tricky, too."

The falter in his steps was almost imperceptible. He didn't stop until he had to show his boarding pass to the flight attendant working the gate.

"You worry too much, Hunter. It's not good for your health."

He flashed his salesman's smile at the attendant. Her return smile was professional and automatic.

"I bet you've got one of those fake mustaches to go along with it." The flight attendant raised one carefully shaped eyebrow. "The trick is not to get nervous and sweat a lot, otherwise they can come off at the most inconvenient times."

He chuckled nervously and said loudly. "Always the kidder, Hunter. See you around."

"Sooner than you think," I said as he walked away from me.

The pretty young woman was looking back and forth between us, trying to decide what was going on. I smiled at her.

"Don't buy any watches from him."

She grinned then, sure that it had all been a joke. "I'll remember that." Then she followed Mattson.

With a sigh I wandered over to the plate glass window and stood staring out, my hands shoved into the pockets of my jeans. The plane uncoupled from the terminal and backed away inch by inch. Around me, all was quiet. No more flights would be leaving until morning.

The plane's wheels had just lifted from the runway when a breathless Tyler reached my side.

"Why is it that you're never where you're supposed to be, Hunter?" Her eyes followed the blinking lights as the plane eased off over Calumet Farm.

"Keeps everybody guessing. Makes life interesting." The plane banked and disappeared. I turned to Tracey. "What brings you here, Tyler?"

Cold, snowy weather becomes her, makes her face glow and her eyes dance. Droplets of melted snowflakes glistened on her hair.

"The same thing that brought you here. If it hadn't been for the snow and Newman's cussedness, I would have been here sooner. You do realize, Hunter, that you're going to have to pay me extra for

having to talk to that man."

I grinned. Newman had a thing for Tyler. The feeling was understandably not mutual.

"Why, Tyler, you've made the man's night by calling him."

She grimaced. "The only reason I did is that I couldn't find you. You were supposed to be staking out Mattson's house."

We started slowly back toward the security gate.

"I decided to follow him home from work."

"Why?"

I shrugged. "Just call it gut instinct, finely honed investigative intuition."

"Make me laugh. You were hoping he'd make a last-minute visit to that house so you could do a little snooping."

"You have a devious mind, Tyler." We passed the gate's check-in counter, unmanned and bare. "What *are* you doing here?"

"I took Liza home with me. Or should I say, Liza and a handful of unmounted diamonds. Charlie called. He had figured out the alias Mattson used and found this earlier flight reservation."

So much for feeling safer in the same world with Charlie and his computer. She continued.

"When I called Charlie's friend, he said you had never shown up in his driveway. I knew you were here, and I also

knew I couldn't get in contact with you, so I made the ultimate sacrifice and called Newman."

"How did you know I'd be here? I could have been anywhere. In a ditch. In a hospital. Mattson could have asked me in for coffee."

She smiled. "Mattson wasn't home either."

Shot down again.

"So you called Newman."

"It took me three tries to dial the number."

I laughed.

"And I had to resort to threats to get him out here. That man is under the mistaken assumption that the average citizen can't possibly know anything the police don't know."

"Newman's here?"

"At the ticket counter throwing his badge and his weight around, which he has plenty of. I gave him the information Charlie gave me. He's a little peeved that they wouldn't stop the plane from taking off."

I pushed open the glass door and Tyler preceded me into the terminal's waiting area. "Where's Liza?"

"With Agnes, giving a statement to the police." She frowned

at me. "Why did you let him get on that plane? You could have flashed your license and caused enough ruckus to keep him here. Airlines don't like being conduits of stolen property."

"And spoil all Mattson's fun? Why, Tyler, I'm surprised at you. After he went to all that trouble, it would have been a shame to keep him from his moment of glory."

"That's cruel, Hunter."

"Yeah." I grinned at her. "I know."

She grinned back at me. The quiet was jolted.

"Well, then, let me speak to someone who has some authority! That plane will be landing before you yokels in Atlanta can get your act together!"

Even though he was at the opposite end of the terminal, Newman's voice carried clearly across to us.

"Newman really knows how to foster the spirit of cooperation between law enforcement agencies, doesn't he?"

"He wants to talk to you, Hunter."

"I figured he might." I took her hand and slipped it into the crook of my arm. "Come on, Trace. I owe you dinner."



# THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



Arthur Tress

Not an ice situation to be in. We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less—and be sure to include a crime, please), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, New York 10017.

The winning entry for the May Mysterious Photograph will be found on page 155.

FICTION

# Death of an Otter



by  
**Joseph  
Hansen**

Illustration by Tony Capparelli

72

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The bunch of flowers in his hand caught her attention for a moment, no more than that. She turned her head away: He had got used to how short they kept her hair. It made her head look like a small boy's, and the absence of makeup added to that effect. Never mind. Her head was a beautiful shape, and her skin and features were good—she'd never needed makeup. This visit was the same as always. When the nurse opened the door to her room, and he saw her seated in sunlight from a window, and the nurse said cheerfully, "Look who's come to see you," and she turned that brief, blank look on him, his heart made as if to surge out of his chest.

He wanted to rush in and take her in his arms, and hold her close, as he had done a thousand times in their lost years together. But he couldn't do that. Once long ago, when the doctor had told him she seemed better, less withdrawn, more her old self, Hack had tried it. It was a mistake he'd never forget. She had watched him come to her without a sign of alarm, but when he'd put his hands on her shoulders, she'd started to scream. Her eyes filled with horror. She beat and scratched at him, kicked at him, writhed, struggled. Nurses, attendants, a doctor had come. She was se-

dated in a few short minutes. But to him, her screaming seemed to go on and on.

It wasn't him she was frightened of. He knew that. She was back again in those nightmare hours aboard a stinking tub of a fishing boat up from Mexico with a cargo of brown heroin. That night was long ago, but it looked as if she was going to live in it forever. The early hopes of the doctors had proved wishful thinking. Her times of drugged calm grew longer, but she never once spoke. And when the terror swept over her, it was as if no time at all had passed. He blamed himself for letting the metedors take her, though he didn't fairly see how he could have prevented it, even if he'd foreseen it. It had happened fast.

Hardest of all to live with was that somehow he ought to have foreseen it. He had been a peace officer for a dozen years when it happened. He had them, and they knew he had them—unless they crippled him. And they did that by snatching Linda. Then he'd lost his head, and called for backup. His fellow officers had dropped the metedors bloody and dead in the bottom of their boat. They'd given Hack Bohannon back his wife. But they'd been too long getting there, and she was lost to him. He sat now in a creaky white wicker chair

opposite her, and talked quietly about his stables, his horses, the horses he boarded for others.

She looked at him sometimes, briefly. He wasn't sure what understanding, if any, was in those looks. But once, when he was telling her about this spring's foals, wobbling up from the straw on their spindly legs, he thought she smiled for a second. Maybe not. Maybe it was the shadow of leaves from the tree outside the window touching her mouth. But he wanted to believe it was a smile. When the nurse came with a vase for the flowers and by glancing at her watch indicated it was time for him to leave, and he rose with his sweat-stained Stetson in his hand—he wanted to bend and kiss the mouth where that possible smile had appeared. But he only said, "Be good. I'll be back next Monday." Out in the cool, dim hallway of the lumbering old house, he wondered why he'd said such a damned fool thing. She'd never been any way but good in her life.

**G**loom always settled in him after these visits. He had never brought anyone along before. Today he had brought T. Hodges, a young deputy from the sheriff station where he used to work.

She was the first woman friend he'd made since he and Linda had been wrenched apart. She was very different. Oh, slight like Linda, yes, but dark, with a way of smiling with her eyes because she was self-conscious about her teeth—the upper ones stuck out a little. He wasn't sure why she'd asked to come along with him today. Maybe because she sensed the visits were hard for him and made him feel more than commonly alone.

He judged her to be too young to have to face this kind of situation, even at second hand. He'd told her no before. Then, because it seemed to hurt her, this time he had said yes. But she'd been troubled on the ride over the mountains from the coast, and quiet. She'd got out of the old pickup and walked with him across lawns past flowerbeds in the morning sunshine. Quiet. She'd even climbed the steps to the great verandah of the house, but there she had lost her nerve. He'd crossed the porch to the door and rung the bell before he missed her and looked back. She stood at the top of the steps, tears glistening in her dark eyes and shaking her head. "I can't," she said. "I'll wait here."

He came out onto the porch now, put on his Stetson, looked for her. She was far off across

a downhill sweep of grass, sitting alone on a green bench under a willow. He went down the steps slowly, and stood at the foot of the steps and waited for her to come to him. She came, at a slow walk, head hanging. When she reached him, she looked up, ashamed. "I guess I'm a coward," she said. "I didn't know that. I'm sorry, Hack. I wasn't any help to you at all, was I?" He gave her a small hug, left the arm over her shoulder, started with her toward the truck. "How was she?" T. Hodges asked.

"She almost smiled today," he said. He twisted the rusty handle, pulled open the rusty-hinged cab door for her. She climbed up and sat on the cracked, tape-mended seat. He slammed the door, went around and got in at the driver's side, slammed that door, the tinny sound loud in the mountain stillness. The cab smelled of timothy hay and of the dried manure underfoot on the tattered rubber floor mat. He brought the engine noisily to life. "Ah, hell," he said. "I'm making it up. She was just the same today. She isn't getting any better." He let the hand-brake go, and rolled the rattly truck off across crackling gravel.

Along Highway 1 north of Madrone, buildings had gone

up lately—motels, and places to eat. Stucco and neon. He didn't like them. When there'd come a chance, he'd voted against them. He'd written a protest letter to the local weekly paper. He'd never run into anyone who wanted them. Yet up they went, didn't they? There, damn it, was a whole new shopping center—boutiques, boulangeries, cafes serving nothing but crepes. Then there were isolated hamburger joints and fried shrimp counters. A good many hadn't made it. Some stood boarded up, bleak in the cold spring sunlight off the ocean. Others kept changing hands.

Here was an ugly white place repainted, paper banners taped to it, GRAND OPENING, last Saturday's date. A woman in a green down jacket and blue-jeans was up on an aluminum ladder yanking the highest of these signs down. She turned her head so he saw her face just as he passed. He was startled, and put a foot on the brake pedal. He edged off onto the road shoulder. T. Hodges looked at him curiously. "Somebody I used to know," he said, and watched the dusty side mirror until the highway was clear, and swung onto it, and headed back for the place. She was tearing down the paper signs from the windows now. He got down from the truck and walked over to

her. "Dorothy Hawes?" he said.

She turned, the wadded paper signs clutched in her arms. The sea wind blew her gray hair across her eyes. But she saw who he was. And showed alarm before she caught herself and smiled. "Why, Hack Bohannon. How are you?"

"When did you come back?" he said.

"A few weeks ago." She tossed her head to let wind blow the hair off her face. "I should have let you know, but I've been busy setting up shop here."

"How long has it been?" he said. "Twenty years?"

"Eighteen," she said, "but I never thought of it as anything but temporary. I hated Los Angeles." She gave a shudder that had nothing to do with the wind chill factor. "But work was easier to find there. I was on my own, wasn't I?" Her young husband had drowned, leaving her with two girls scarcely more than babies. "Mouths to feed, and all that. Sometimes we need cities, no way around it."

T. Hodges walked up, interested. Bohannon said, "Dorothy Hawes, Teresa Hodges. She's a deputy sheriff."

"And you? You must be a captain by now." Dorothy Hawes's blue eyes rested for a moment thoughtfully on him. "You were the best they had. The one who cared."

Bohannon shook his head. "I quit some time back. I keep horses now. Up Rodd Canyon."

The Hawes woman said, "I'm not surprised. There's no justice in this world." She turned away. "Come on. Have lunch. I'm in need of customers." She laughed, struggling, arms filled with the crumpled paper, to open the door. He opened it for her. They all went inside. The restaurant, white and cold as the innards of a refrigerator, smelled good. The smells came warm from the kitchen, onions and herbs, chilis, cheeses. "You've got your choice of tables." Hawes made for the kitchen swing door, calling out something in Spanish to whoever was beyond it. She vanished, but she was back in a minute, unburdened of the signs.

"We planned to picnic on the beach," T. Hodges said.

"All right. I think I can scare up a picnic basket. How does chicken sound? Rotisserie. Mustard and honey glaze? You'll love it. A slab of Monterey jack? Sourdough bread delivered by hand fresh from San Francisco this morning? My wine license isn't here yet, but I'll slip you a bottle of something wonderful, if you promise not to tell." She grinned at T. Hodges. "Or am I suborning you?"

"Not if you let me pay for it."

"It will only take two min-



utes." Dorothy Hawes hustled back to the kitchen. "And you'll be on your way."

The basket stood on rough rocks. The wind off the ocean was strong. A tablecloth had been folded into the basket, but they didn't try to lay it out, nor to set plates and glasses on it. They tore the chicken apart with their hands, ate with their fingers. Bohannon used his clasp knife to cut the bread and cheese. The wine was good, bright and clean-tasting. Everything was delicious. The sea air helped make it that way. But the wind was too cold to invite sitting still for long. They closed up the bones and crusts in the basket, climbed down to the sand, and walked.

It hadn't been a talky lunch, and they didn't talk as they walked, either. The only sound was the slap and slither of the surf on the sand, and the crunch of their soles in the sand. The water, moiling around shoreward rocks, was a dozen different shades of blue and green. Out farther, beds of brown kelp rose and fell heavily on the sparkling swells. Bohannon felt good that T. Hodges was with him. The gloom was lifting already.

Then they rounded a clump of rocks. She was a couple of steps ahead of him, she gasped,

she stopped in her tracks. And he saw what she saw. Lying in the surf, thick fur matted, eyes half shut and glazed over, stiffened body rolling in the wash of the tide, was a sea otter, a big fellow, maybe sixty pounds. A dark hole was in the skull behind the left ear. Hack knew it for a bullet hole before he passed the basket to T. Hodges, crouched, and picked the dead animal up. Cradling it, heavy, cold, wet, against him, he started back along the beach to find the truck. T. Hodges had recognized the bullet hole, too. She hurried after him.

"I can't believe it," she panted. "He was drunk. Nobody thought he meant it."

"Looks like he did," Bohannon said.

**M**adrone had a white barn of a building for meetings. In the big pine plank hall dances were held, rummage sales when rain and cold wind sent folks indoors, community suppers, shows of paintings by local artists, political gatherings in election years. Last night, the folding chairs that often stood in stacks along the walls had been brought out into the middle of the room and set up in rows. Some were metal, some wood, but none was empty by the time the meeting got under

way. The dirt parking area outside was jammed with cars. Cars stood along the road shoulders, too, north and south.

The meeting was about sea otters. The inshore waters off Madrone, and for about two hundred miles up and down the coast from Monterey to Morro Bay, were a sea otter refuge. Once nearly wiped out by fur hunters, the animals had come back under government protection. There were nearly two thousand now, breeding, feeding, playing in the massive kelp beds. Tourists parked alongside Highway 1 to watch them through binoculars. They were clownish eaters, lying on their backs, flat rocks on their chests, cracking abalone, sea urchins, spiny lobsters against the rocks, stuffing their mouths. Gulls circled for scraps. It made a show.

But it didn't amuse the men who once made a living here diving for abalone. An adult sea otter can eat twelve pounds of abalone in a day. It didn't amuse the operators of fishing boats who had been forbidden to use gill nets in the shallow waters to catch halibut. Too many otters got caught and drowned in gill nets. Now the federal government, worried about offshore oil rigs coming into the area, proposed moving some of the sea otters to an island off

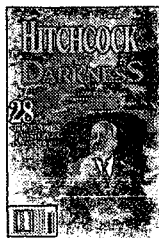
Southern California, in case there were oil spills. So there would be a seed colony, in case the Central Coast otters all died.

A good many speakers took the microphones at the meeting. An oil company spokesman, in a shirt and tie, said there was no risk to the otters. Sturdy old Sharon Webb, in jeans and hiking boots, who'd spent decades battling to save nature from the ravaging greed of men, said the translocation was well worth a million tax dollars. A commercial fisherman from down the coast who made his living off the abalone around the island protested. Everyone got his or her say. Bohannon found the slat seat of the wooden folding chair hard under his butt after a while, and kept looking at his watch. The meeting went on a long time, mostly in circles. But fireworks broke out at the end, and all who stayed got some excitement to cut the boredom and send them home with something to talk about before bedtime.

Brick Lightner had a seat down toward the front, where the federal and state wildlife people sat at a table facing the crowd, trying to field questions and monitor speeches. Lightner, a balding, bony man in a torn, greasy leather jacket, had

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called out more than once, "Aw, sit down and shut up," during this talk and that. Afterwards, someone said he'd kept mumbling "goddamn commies" under his breath. And firing up his breath from a pint whisky bottle in his jacket pocket. But he'd made no effort to get a microphone and talk himself.

Until the chairman, a young naturalist for the wildlife service, a sunburned kid who kept an eye on the otters through a telescope from Piedras Blancas lighthouse during business hours, said it was late, and made polite remarks about how important it had been to hear all sides of the question, and how other local meetings like this would be held up and down the coast before any decision was made, and thanked everybody for coming.

Then Lightner roared to his feet, shouting, waving his angular arms, his long, stringy, reddish hair flying. "We don't need no more meetings. Jesus Christ, isn't there one suffering soul in this room with a little common sense? Just what did a damn sea otter ever do for you? Any of you. Can you answer that? Did a sea otter ever give you a dollar for a loaf of bread or a gallon of gas? Did a sea otter ever pay your rent or the taxes to send your kids to school?"

People had already started

scraping up out of their chairs to leave, but nobody left. Not now. Some stood in front of their chairs, many with arms half into coats they had begun to put on. Some sat down again. But nobody said anything. Everybody listened, a good many of them with mouths half opened—making themselves look to the viewer as stupid as Lightner seemed to think they were, though Bohannon knew they weren't. Lightner raved on.

"You know the answer to that. The answer is 'no.' But I'll tell you who does give you a dollar now and then, who does pay your rent and taxes. Me, and men like me. And where do we get those dollars? From abalone and halibut, that's where. My old man fished this coastline thirty years and me after him. Until the goddamn government let those useless animals here to eat up everything under the water and leave nothing for us. Nothing."

He had been facing the crowd. Now he turned and jabbed a knuckly finger at the government people at the table. "And now you come telling us you're going to take two hundred fifty of these devouring locusts and put them someplace else on the coast to take away the honest livelihood of other fishermen. Because the sea otter is an 'endangered species—' " he spoke

the words with a mincing sneer "—and has to be protected." Spittle had collected on his mouth. He wiped at it angrily with the back of a hand.

"Well, let me tell you who's the endangered species. It's you and me. Hell, there's two hundred thousand sea otters up off Alaska. Maybe more. Too many to count. To listen to folks talk here tonight, you'd think if we don't watch out sea otters was going to disappear any minute now off the face of the deep. Well, they ain't. But I'll tell you where they are gonna disappear from. They're gonna disappear from this stretch of coast right out here." He made a wide gesture with a ragged arm. "And do you know how? It won't be the government that does it. For a million dollars. It'll be you and me, my friends, my fellow citizens." He managed a kind of crazy smile now, and a crazy-wise nod of his head. "We are gonna vote.

"And I'll tell you how we're gonna vote. Ain't a pickup truck around here hasn't got a rifle racked up over the back window. Now, you know that's so. I don't quite know why. Hasn't been a bear sighted around here in twenty years. Hasn't been a cougar. They don't let you shoot the deer. Those rifles are there because it's your God-given right as an American to have them there, and that's

enough. It's in the Constitution."

"Go home, Brick," somebody shouted. "Sleep it off."

"Wait a minute. I said we was gonna vote. And I'll tell you how. We're gonna vote with bullets. Gonna put them rifles to some use. Every man jack here is going down to the beach tomorrow at sunup, take that rifle down, and shoot himself half a dozen sea otters."

People jeered, moaned, and began to leave.

"Hold on. You want to solve this problem or not? All these sons of—" he waved drunkenly at the table "—bureaucrats are gonna do is talk, talk, talk. We have to eat, we have to feed our kids. Sea otters are nothing but vermin. Getting a few of them out of here won't change nothing. Still won't be no abalone. Still can't drop gill nets. They all gotta go. And I promise you, I'll kill my share. And if the rest of you got any guts, you'll be out there with me tomorrow, and do likewise. If we don't do it, nobody will. Use your common sense."

But by this time, no one was listening any more.

When they swung in at the sheriff's station and parked on the leached asphalt of the lot there, under the high hedge of big old ragged eucalyptus

trees, it was time for T. Hodges to go to work. They got out of the truck. The truck bed was strewn with grit, straw, spilled oats. Bohannon lifted the stiff carcass of the otter out of it and followed T. Hodges into the station through the side door. He stopped at Gerard's office. She gave him a small smile and went on out to the reception and communications desk in the front room.

Bohannon worked the knob of Gerard's door awkwardly, pushed the door with his shoulder, stepped in, and laid the damp, dead body of the otter on the floor. Gerard was seated behind his desk, talking on the telephone. He watched Bohannon with raised brows, told the caller, "I'll get back to you," and set the receiver in place. He stood up and came around the desk, and stood staring down at what Bohannon had brought him. Sea water pooled around the dark form on the sleek vinyl tiles. "Son of a bitch," Gerard said. "He went and did it."

"I don't know if there are any more," Bohannon said. "I didn't look. I just came with this one."

"There better not be any more," Gerard said darkly. "What a crazy fool." He dropped disgusted into his chair again. "I knew the day his mother died, we were in for it. Nance was the only one who could control him."

Bohannon grunted. "Some of the time."

"Well, she broke his bottles," Gerard said. "That helped. I'm only saying, this is the worst."

"The fine is twenty thousand dollars, which I don't think he's got. He'll lose his boat. Maybe his house."

"He won't need them," Gerard said. "He'll be in jail for a year. Maybe the worst was that last time he beat up Lucille. Blood all over the kitchen. Little Nolan screaming in a corner. When I saw her face, I thought she was a goner. She didn't look human any more."

"I wasn't here for that," Bohannon said.

"No, I'm wrong again," Gerard said. "The worst was Bob Hawes drowning."

"The storm did that," Bohannon said. "Wonder was, everybody on board didn't drown. Yes, Brick was the skipper, and he shouldn't have been drunk. But Bob's death wasn't his fault. The jury was right."

"I guess so." Gerard looked at the open door of the office and shouted, "Vern!" An echoing "Hoy!" came from someplace in the building. Heels thumped in the hallway. A fairhaired young fellow in uniform appeared in the doorway. Gerard told him, "Take Tommy with you, and go pick up Brick Lightner. You know where he lives? Charge him with—"



"Aw, no." Vern saw the otter on the floor. He looked stricken. He stepped into the office and crouched over the dead animal. "Shot?" His voice wobbled. He stroked the brown fur. "Aw, hell." He looked up at Gerard, tears in his eyes. "This? You mean that crazy drunk did this?"

"He threatened it last night," Bohannon said. "Everybody at the meeting heard him."

Vern pushed grimly to his feet. "Okay, we'll pick him up." He started out of the room, swearing under his breath.

"Vern," Gerard cautioned. "Keep your temper."

"Yessir," Vern said. In the hallway, he called out, "Tommy, let's go." And two pairs of boots banged off toward the parking lot door. It slammed behind the young officers. Gerard lifted the telephone receiver and said to Bohannon:

"I'll notify Fish and Wildlife. You want to get us some coffee?" His finger hesitated over the push buttons. "Where did this happen?"

"Old Bull Cove. You know it? The kid in the lighthouse couldn't have seen it. There's a tall bluff."

"I know it." Gerard nodded and punched the buttons. Bohannon went for the coffee. It simmered in a glass urn on a hotplate near T. Hodge's desk. She was wearing her headphones and little mike on its

curved wand, and her hands were busy on a keyboard, typing up records. He carried mugs of coffee back to Gerard's office. The lieutenant was on his knees, examining the otter. "Looks like a 30-30. That's what Lightner owns." He got to his feet and accepted the mug, steam curling on the surface of the coffee. "Sit down," he told Bohannon, and went around behind the desk again and sat down there.

Bohannon stepped over the otter and took a chair. "Wildlife going to patrol the beach, looking for more?"

"Right," Gerard said. "They'll pick this one up and give it a thorough going over. They sounded grim."

"I don't remember its ever happening before." Bohannon poked into the ragged breast pocket of his old Levi jacket for a cigarette, lit the cigarette, pawed in the papers on Gerard's desk for an ashtray, dropped the kitchen match into it. "There's a stiff fine for even taking firearms onto the beach. Signs posted all along the highway."

"Yeah, well—" The phone rang, and Gerard picked it up. He listened for a few seconds, grimaced, said, "Okay, forget him for now. Go talk to Lucille Dodson. See why she didn't report it." He banged the receiver down. "Lightner's not home.

His boat's out. At the dock, they say he took it out at dawn."

"Carrying his gun?" Bohannon said.

"In plain sight." Gerard nodded. "But there's worse news than that. He had little Nolan with him."

The Dodson place stood among pines in Settlers Cove, a handsome place of redwood planks, decks, glass, strong angular beams. Eliot Dodson was some kind of electronics whiz, a trouble-shooter whose work took him off on jets a good many times a year. Sometimes as far away as India and Japan. After that last awful beating Brick had given Lucille, she'd been in the hospital a long time while they put her broken face back together. She had met Dodson there when he was recovering from intestinal surgery of some sort. They had married when Lucille's divorce from Lightner was final. Lucille had won custody of the one child, a freckle-faced, red-headed boy of seven, named Nolan after a famous baseball pitcher.

The tan and gold county car with the strip of lights along its top stood at the foot of zigzag wooden steps that led up to the Dodson house. The radio inside the car crackled on and off. Bohannon braked his pickup on

the winding road to let Gerard run out. Gerard worked the door, opened it, jumped down, turned. "Can't you spare the time? I'd like you to hear what she says."

Bohannon looked at his watch, grimaced, reached across and closed the passenger door, then wheeled the truck to the road edge and left it angled in the ditch. Old George Stubbs and young Manuel Rivera would keep everything going at the stables till he turned up—though he didn't feel it was fair to leave them to it for so long. He followed Gerard up the stairs. The two young officers were standing in a big room with a fieldstone fireplace, talking to Lucille, who was also standing. She was fairhaired and slender. Married to Brick Lightner, she'd dragged around in jeans and sweaters, hands chapped, hair ragged, looking twice her age. Marriage to a decent man had changed that. She stood straight now, and though anybody with half an eye could see her face had been patched up, she looked prettier than she'd ever done at Brick's.

"Mrs. Dodson?" The glass sliding door to the front deck, which was strewn with long brown needles from the pines that crowded around, stood open and Gerard stepped through it. "Lieutenant Gerard." He nod-

ded his head back to indicate Bohannon, and spoke Bohannon's name by way of introduction. Lucille gave them a mechanical smile.

Vern said to Gerard, "Brick walked in and took Nolan out of his bed. The boy was dressing when Mrs. Dodson heard them talking and went in to see."

"It was four thirty in the morning," she said. "He had no right to come here, you know. There's a court order. He can't come within two hundred yards of this place."

"She told him not to take the boy," Vern said.

"He'd lost the right even to see Nolan," she said. "For touching him, he could go straight to prison."

"But he had a gun," Bohannon said.

She nodded bitterly. "And I think he would have used it. He was terribly drunk. He could be that way and still walk around. A crazy look in his eyes. It was this sea otter business. He was going to kill them all. From his boat. And no one would be able to punish him for it—not if he had Nolan with him. If they tried to capture him—" her voice trembled, and she bit her lower lip hard so as not to start to cry "—he'd kill Nolan and himself."

"And you believed that?" Gerard said.

She eyed him coldly. "Would you take a chance, if it was your little boy?"

"No, ma'am," Gerard said. "I guess I wouldn't."

"He said not to set the law after him," Vern said.

Gerard looked at her. "And you didn't." He held up a hand. "No, wait. You didn't notify us. We came to you because someone at the dock saw Brick with the boy when he took his boat out this morning. You didn't do anything he told you not to. Remember that. Rest easy with that."

"Are you going to call the Coast Guard?" she said. "For the death of one animal, you're going to force him to murder his own son?"

"We won't let that happen," Gerard said. "But I wish you'd reported this as soon as he left here. We might have stopped him before he got to the boat."

"I was afraid for Nolan. No—" she shook her head angrily "—what I should have done was follow them in my car and make him take me along. My mind wasn't working."

"It happens to all of us." Bohannon remembered again the time with the smugglers. "Where's your husband?"

"Seattle," she said numbly. "He's flying to San Francisco. He'll drive down from there."

"That's good." Gerard turned

for the door, turned back again. "Try not to worry. Brick's got a loud mouth, you know that. But it's one thing to beat up your wife, it's another to go up against a whole community."

"He killed that otter, lieutenant. He isn't thinking like a normal person. He says he has nothing more to lose."

"He won't kill his son," Bohannon said. "As for himself—we're all scared of dying, when it comes down to it. He'll turn up with his tail between his legs. You'll see."

She regarded him steadily for a moment, wondering, worrying. Then she drew breath, said "Thank you" to them all, and they trooped out, heavy-footed, boots noisy on the deck planks and the steps going down. Somewhere distant, a bluejay squawked in the afternoon silence of the pines.

**H**orses waken with the sun. And Hack had worked a couple of hours in the stables when he came into the pine plank kitchen at seven forty-five. The place was aromatic with breakfast smells. Stubbs, wrapped in a mighty apron, worked at the towering old cooking range. He didn't hear the flap of the screen door, nor the thump of Bohannon's old boots on the planks. The bat-

tered portable radio on the counter beside him was too loud. Mostly what radios brought up here in these canyons was static mixed with a few faint strains of music. Country and western? Bohannon walked over and switched the radio off.

Stubbs, turning over golden slabs of fried mush, gave him a startled look, white cottony eyebrows raised over round, china-blue eyes. He was in his seventies, a one-time rodeo rider, crippled up now from too many broken bones, and from arthritis in wet weather. But he did more around the stables than most men half his age could do, and cooked besides—though it sometimes pained Bohannon so much, watching him limp and wince, that Bohannon pretended he preferred his own cooking to the old man's. It was a wry, running joke between them.

"You shouldn't be so quick to switch off radios," Stubbs said. "You might learn stuff to your advantage."

"Is that right?" Bohannon stretched a long arm around Stubbs's stocky form to snag a tall blue and white specked country coffee pot off its burner. He tilted coffee into a thick mug, set the pot back, started off with the mug. "Such as?"

"Such as, the Coast Guard found the *Abalone Queen* just

after sundown, adrift twenty miles out." Stubbs took eggs from a big old refrigerator, slammed the door. Bohannon drew out a chair at the round deal eating table in the middle of the kitchen and sat down. Stubbs laid the six eggs carefully on the counter. "Adrift, because Brick Lightner was passed out drunk. His boy was trying to get at the engine because the starter wouldn't work. But he wasn't strong enough to pry up the trap door. He's only ten, or something like that."

"Ten would be about right." Bohannon was wondering whether he shouldn't shower before breakfast. "So they rescued them both, and Brick is in jail again, right? For killing the otter?"

"You'd think so." Stubbs lifted a lid off a black iron skillet and turned over sausages that sizzled. He set the lid back on with a clack. "But they had to let him go." Stubbs turned from the stove and blinked at Bohannon with a little smile. "That surprises you, now, don't it? You know why they had to let him go?"

"I guess you're going to tell me," Bohannon said, and pretended indifference, lighting a cigarette, tasting the coffee. It was too hot. He burned his mouth. "I guess that radio is a cornucopia."

"It's a Sony," Stubbs said, "but it talks English. He had the wrong gun, that's why. It was a deer rifle killed that otter. Like you said last night. But the gun Brick Lightner had on board his boat—it was a shotgun."

"I'll be damned," Bohannon said mildly.

"And there's more," Stubbs said.

Bohannon gave his head a shake. "I don't know how much more I can stand. Didn't Lucille press charges for Brick snatching Nolan? She and her husband got court orders against him for that."

"Didn't say nothing on the radio about that part," Stubbs said again. "See? I told you it was no cornucopia."

"Just a simple Sony," Bohannon said. "What more?"

"Brick Lightner wasn't back at his place more than a few hours when somebody come in and shot him dead."

Bohannon stared. "Who? What for?"

"There now." Satisfied, Stubbs turned back to his cooking. "I got you good, didn't I? I said you ought to listen to the radio."

"Who was it?" Bohannon asked.

And a voice said, "They want it to be me."

Bohannon turned. The voice came in from the long, covered

plank walk that fronted the house, came in through the open door and windows of the kitchen. It was a fine, fresh morning, nippy but sunny and blue-skied. Sage and eucalyptus perfumed the breeze. Bohannon thought he knew the voice. The silhouette at the screen door made him sure of it. It was Sharon Webb, chunky and hippy and stalwart. He went and opened the screen door.

"Come in," he said. "They bound you over?"

"I drove to the sheriff like a bat out of hell to report a murder," she said, "and next thing I know I'm being booked and fingerprinted. Said the gun in my pickup had been fired. Nobody's fingerprints on it but mine. I'm out on bail because Ford Larrimore—" she meant the judge "—is a dear old friend. And I pay my taxes."

"Have some coffee?" Bohannon said.

"Breakfast, Miz Webb?" Stubbs said.

"I'm too angry to eat," she told him, "thank you." She said to Bohannon, "But, yes, I'll drink some coffee."

"How did you happen to find him?" Bohannon asked after they sat down at the table together. "Was he dead when you got there?"

"No way." She gave her

cropped gray head a shake. "He was alive and ornery as ever, and I was giving him a large piece of my mind over shooting that otter."

"How did you know he'd come home?" Bohannon said.

"I guess you can't get TV up here, can you?" she said.

"Not even cable," he said. "Was it on the news?"

"At eleven. That they'd towed the *Abalone Queen* in, and weren't holding Brick in the killing of the otter."

"Because he had the wrong kind of gun," Bohannon said.

"Fiddle-faddle," Sharon Webb said. "Why hadn't he stashed his 30-30 aboard the boat earlier, days ago? Why didn't he throw it overboard after he shot the otter?" She gulped coffee and set the mug down loudly. "Of course Brick Lightner killed that otter. You heard him say he was going to. Who else would, anyway? For what reason?"

Bohannon shrugged. "So now it's your gun that's in question. Somebody used it to kill him while you were in the kitchen, talking to him? Is that how it was?"

"Bullet went spang into his back while we stood there talking." Bohannon's cigarette pack lay on the bleached white surface of the table. She reached for it with stubby, shaking fingers, pulled a cigarette from it,



set the cigarette in her mouth. "I shouldn't do this. Poisoning myself, poisoning the atmosphere. But I keep seeing the look on his face when the bullet hit. Like the devil had grabbed him. He wasn't surprised—he was plain terrified." Bohannon used a thumbnail on a wooden match and held the flame for her. The cigarette smoked. She inhaled the smoke, and closed her eyes for a moment gratefully. She let the smoke out through her snub nose, opened her eyes, and looked into Bohannon's face. "I need your help. Everyone knows how I hated him. It's as natural for the sheriff, the county attorney, any jury to decide I killed him as it was for me to decide he killed that otter. Which he did, damn it."

"I'll see what I can do," Bohannon said.

**T**he Lightner place was not yet an eyesore, but it was getting there. Yellowing white paint peeled from the clapboards, window screens were torn and curling, and trickles of rust had run down from the corners of the windowsills. The composition shingle roof showed seams of graying tar at leakage points. Weeds sprouted through the crushed abalone shell that paved the ground. Beside the house

was a dory tilted on blocks, half scraped of its paint, a job begun and abandoned long ago. A strip of shiplap had sprung loose from the warp of rain and sun. Bohannon rolled his dusty pickup past, looking at the neighborhood. The houses were small, old, and, because of the humpiness of the foothill terrain, scattered. The nearest place on Lightner's side of the patchy roadway was downhill and cut off by a stand of brushy trees. The house in sight across the road was steeply downhill, too. They wouldn't have seen anything that happened at Lightner's from there. But by craning his neck, he caught a glimpse of blue paint up the slope. He took a wrong turning and got lost for five minutes. Then he found the road.

The blue paint was on window frames and the door of a place made out of native stone. Eccentric. A fairytale cottage. Rocks in terraces made a garden in front, with too many plaster elves and iron deer and flamingos. There was also an ugly precast cement fountain. Bohannon climbed in his worn boots among these frights and rapped at the door, which was arched at the top. He expected a gnome to open it. But it was an old man, barechested, grizzled, muscular, leathery. Of course. Carl Tunis. Crazy Carl.

It had been years since Bohannon had called him to mind. His lunatic letters used to appear in the paper all the time. But if Bohannon had been asked, he'd have said Tunis was dead.

He wore grimy brown walking shorts and sweaty sandals. He had a handful of prunes, and kept popping these into his mouth and chewing them with false teeth that rattled like castanets. He held the hand out to Bohannon. "Have a prune, sheriff. I'm eighty-three years old, and I do a hundred push-ups a day. You're breathing hard. From those steps. I can run up those steps top speed and never notice. I'm healthy because I eat only dried fruits, raw vegetables, and nuts."

"No, thanks," Bohannon said. "Did you see or hear anything down at the Lightner place last night?"

"I go to bed with the chickens," Carl Tunis said. "It's the law of nature. Man's an animal, just like a horse or a cow. They go to bed when the sun goes down."

"Last night—the shot that killed Brick Lightner didn't wake you up?"

"Matter of fact, what woke me up was all the cars," Tunis said. "A person doesn't live in Madrone to sleep in the middle of roaring traffic. A person expects quiet up here at night. I

got up and looked out. Good moon last night. Lightner's looked like a parking lot." Tunis blew a prune pit past Bohannon's ear, and clapped a hand to his mouth to keep his teeth from flying after it.

"You recognize any of the cars?" Bohannon said.

"Shiny big one, looked expensive, European, I think. Lightner's red pickup, of course. That Webb woman's ditsy little Jap pickup. And a pale colored van. Four."

"Did you see any of the drivers?"

"Shadowy," Tunis said. "The gun went off. I seen the fire from the barrel. Outside in the back. Heard glass break, too. Window glass it was, I guess, from the radio."

"Which car drove off first?" Bohannon said.

"Fancy new one. Tall man got in it. I don't know him. It's too far. Turn yourself around and look down there. You can see how far it is. And Brick Lightner, he doesn't trim the trees, does he? Hard to do that from inside a bottle." The old man cackled at his joke. Bohannon turned as ordered, and had to agree it was hard to see. Tunis said, "He wore spectacles, though. You know, a man wouldn't have to do that if he'd eat raw carrots every day. People go against nature. It's what

kills them. I'm going to live forever." He pounded his barrel chest with his fists, stood straight, drew air in noisily, exhaled it. The loose false teeth glared white in the morning sun. "It's a wonderful thing, the gift of life. People shouldn't mistreat it."

"Did you see Sharon Webb leave?" Bohannon said.

"That woman is a meddler," Tunis said. "Can't leave things alone to take their natural course. If you're a meddler, you're going to meddle once too often. I've got nothing against a person playing a tune. It's when they expect everybody else to dance to it, the trouble begins. Yes, I saw her leave, slam out through the kitchen door in a panic. He wouldn't dance to her tune, now would he—Brick? And she got fed up with it, and killed him. People will drive you crazy if you let them." He wagged his head of dirty white locks. "Trick is to breathe deep, control your heartbeat, stay serene."

"Who did the van belong to?" Bohannon said.

"Beats me," Tunis said. "Nobody from around here."

Bohannon wanted Gerard with him now, but when he rang the sheriff station from the pay phone by the new 76 station on the highway, Gerard

was out in a patrol car someplace up a canyon on business involving stolen cattle. Bohannon frowned at the glittery steel pushbuttons of the phone and chewed his lip. He could ask for uniforms to back him up. If he was sure. He wasn't sure. Not a hundred percent. At last he mumbled thanks and hung up.

Householders were out walking expensive dogs up and down the steep, crooked trails of Settlers Cove. New houses were being built all over, which meant the pines were thinning out. But there were still enough of them to keep the roads in chilly shadow this early in the day. He left the pickup at the foot of the zigzag wooden stairs, behind a dark red Mercedes on whose glossy finish pine needles pattered. Lucille Dodson owned a VW Rabbit. He scuffed with a boot at the little tire imprints in the packed roadside earth where she parked it. He read his watch. She must be taking Nolan to school.

The sliding glass door from the front deck was open again. He could see straight through the house to a rear deck built around the trunks of three big pines. Out there a tall man sat on a bench, sections of the morning paper open on his knees, sections at his feet on the rough redwood planks of the deck. He had a mug of coffee

with him, but he wasn't drinking from it. He wasn't reading, either. He was looking away into the woods. Through horn-rimmed spectacles with big round lenses.

"Eliot Dodson?" Bohannon called.

The man's grayhaired head jerked around. He stood up, the papers sliding off his lap. He peered through the shadowy rooms of the house at Bohannon standing in pine-needle-splintered sunshine. "Who are you?"

"Bohannon, private investigator. May I come in?"

Dodson came into the house, rounded a dining table, stepped down into the living room. "Why should you?"

"Sharon Webb has been arrested for the murder of Brick Lightner last night, and she's asked me to make inquiries for her. Says she didn't do it." The man had come no nearer. Bohannon still had to raise his voice. It was quiet in these woods. It didn't seem right to him for everybody with ears to hear him. He stepped indoors. "A witness saw you at the Lightner house around midnight. I thought you could tell me what happened there."

"What witness?" Dodson said.

"A neighbor. He saw your car. He heard the shot, the breaking window, saw you run to your car and drive off."

"It was dark," Dodson said. "It wasn't me."

"There was a bright moon," Bohannon said. "He had your description right. He described the car."

"I'm calling my lawyer." Dodson took steps.

"What for? You're not being accused of anything. All I need is a witness. Witnesses don't need lawyers. Suspects need lawyers. Am I supposed to suspect you of a crime? You surprise me."

Dodson looked uncertain. "What do you want to know?"

"Sharon Webb claims she was in Lightner's kitchen, talking to him, when he was shot. My witness says he saw her come out the back door, but that doesn't prove she was inside when the shot was fired. Was she?"

Dodson's thin mouth worked. He sat down on a long couch, picked up a phone off an end table, but he didn't push any buttons. He set the phone back. He sighed. "All right. When I got home here from San Francisco, and learned what he'd done to Nolan, I drove over there, yes."

"Had he hurt him?" Bohannon said.

"Not hurt in the common meaning, no. But he'd roused him out of a sound sleep, dragged him off to sea in the dark,

passed out drunk. The boat was drifting, the boy couldn't start the engine. He couldn't get to it under the planks. It was terrifying. The child was a wreck."

"And you were going to do what to Lightner?"

"I was—I was—" Dodson's long, pale face grew red. "Ah, hell. I was furious. I don't know what I was going to do. There's a court order forbidding Brick to touch the boy. I'm trying—I'm trying to be a decent father to him, a proper role model. And that grungy drunk—"

"I know how you feel," Bohannon said. "Did you hear them talking? Did you look through the kitchen window? You're tall enough."

Dodson eyed him sourly, reached for the telephone again, didn't pick it up. He drew a deep breath. "Yes," he said, "I did. She was in there. Yelling at him about killing that otter. He had a bottle in his hand, and kept swigging from it, and grinning at her, mocking her. You know what he thought of women. Then the gun went off. He pitched forward on his face. I'll never forget it."

"And you ran like hell," Bohannon said.

"So would you. Everyone knew I hated him. Twenty people can step forward and testify they've heard me say I'd like to kill him. I never meant it."

"Did you say it last night?" Bohannon asked. "Where anybody heard you?"

Dodson looked sick. "We called Dr. Hesseltine to give Nolan a shot so he could sleep. The poor kid was shattered." Dodson eyed Bohannon gloomily. "The doctor heard me, loud and clear. You know Belle. Tough old dame. She said I was the one who needed the shot. I roared out of here. I wanted my hands around that bastard's throat."

"Brick could take you out, drunk or sober."

"I wasn't thinking," Dodson said.

"The ride over there didn't cool you off? You didn't realize you couldn't brace him with your bare hands? You didn't see the rifle in Sharon Webb's pickup and—"

"No." Dodson stood up sharply. "Absolutely not. It wasn't me. There was someone else there. I heard them moving around back of the house, brush crackling."

"But you didn't see who it was?"

"There wasn't time. The gun went off, and I knew if I was caught there, I'd be blamed."

"There was a light colored van there," Bohannon said. "Maybe the shooter came in that."

"I saw it, but I don't know who owns it."

Bohannon made a face. "Nobody knows." He sighed. "Come on, Mr. Dodson. Let's go over to the sheriff's and get your story on record."

"And set your client free," Dodson said.

Bohannon blinked. "You have something against her?"

"Not a thing." Dodson sat, picked up the phone, punched a number. "But if she didn't do it, won't they put me in her place?" He broke off to speak a man's name into the phone. He listened, grimaced, grunted "Damn," and slammed down the receiver. For a moment, he slumped back on the couch, eyes shut, mouth a line of disgust. Then he sat up, blew air out noisily, ran fingers through his hair, and looked at Bohannon. "Lawyer's not available. My old buddy. Europe. Three weeks. I'm in for it now, right?"

"Only Sharon Webb's fingerprints are on that rifle."

Dodson grunted. "But I was wearing gloves, wasn't I? It's an ingrained habit since I bought the Mercedes. Body oils discolor the leather on the steering wheel."

Bohannon shrugged. "If it comes to that, the county will furnish you a lawyer. But it won't come to that."

Dodson stood up. "Just let me use the bathroom."

He didn't come back from the

bathroom. When, after a long minute, Bohannon called out his name and went looking for him, the bathroom window stood open. Down below, the Mercedes' diesel engine rattled to life. Bohannon ran through the house to the deck in time to see the broad, shiny car roll off down the trail.

When he reached the foot of the zigzag stairs among the fern and poison oak and the chilly shadows of the pines, he heard a car coming. It rounded the bend above, and it was Lucille Dodson's white Rabbit with the black cloth top. She parked in those four little dents the wheels had made in the road edge and got out, looking puzzled to find him there. She brought a shoulder bag out of the car, let the door fall shut, and came up to him. Quizzical.

"Where's Eliot?"

"You tell me," Bohannon said, and outlined for her what had happened. "Where would he go to hide?"

"He has no reason to hide." She looked along the road as if she expected him to come driving back up it right now. As if maybe he'd gone out for a newspaper or cigarettes. "He didn't kill Brick Lightner. He couldn't. He's the gentlest man in the world." Gazing up at him, her



face like some badly bruised flower, her eyes filled with tears. "He's not capable of violence, Mr. Bohannon."

"He admitted he was in a rage last night," Bohannon said. "Over what Brick had put Nolan through."

"Nolan's all right," she said. "He's just fine this morning. As if nothing had happened."

"But last night he was so shaken up you had to phone Belle Hesseltine to quiet him down. And Eliot says Belle heard him say he was going to kill Brick."

"Words," Lucille scoffed. "He was upset. Surely Belle understood that. She's a very wise old woman."

"He went there, just the same," Bohannon said. "And Brick Lightner was killed. So maybe it wasn't just words."

"Excuse me." She brushed past him and started up the stairs, quickly, angrily.

"You going to phone him?" Bohannon called.

She stopped, turned back. "I don't know where."

"He shouldn't have run," Bohannon said. "It makes him look guilty as hell. If he calls, tell him to go to the sheriff and tell him what he told me."

"To help you earn your pay?" Lucille turned, climbed a few steps, turned back again. "Do you know the real irony of all

this? I mean—if the Webb woman did kill Brick?"

"Tell me the real irony," Bohannon said.

"Brick didn't shoot the otter," she said.

"Not with that shotgun," Bohannon said, "but—"

She shook her head. "Not with any gun. Nolan told me on the way to school just now. Brick heated a can of chili for Nolan's breakfast, then passed out on his bunk. All he did all day was sleep, drink, sleep. With Nolan at the helm. He steered strictly away from the kelp beds. And Brick never once picked up a gun."

“A dark red late model Mercedes complete with license number,” Gerard said. “It won’t be hard to spot. We’ll have him soon.” He smiled wryly at Bohannon across his paper-work-strewn desk. “You’ve done it again, Hack. There’ll be formalities, Miz Webb. But as far as the sheriff’s department is concerned, you’re in the clear.”

The stocky little woman gave him a grudging smile for a moment, then looked grieved. “That poor little boy—he never seems to end up in the right place. And as for Lucille, why is it some women are so wretchedly unlucky?”

"She doesn't have a gift for picking husbands," Gerard said. "That's for sure."

Bohannon made a face. "I don't know. She calls Dodson gentle. And she ought to know the difference. I wish I was as sure as you that he did it."

"Gloves smeared the prints on Miz Webb's rifle," Gerard said, "in just the places where prints would be when someone held it to fire it. And he admitted to you he wore gloves."

"He also said somebody else was there," Bohannon said. "Out behind the house in the dark."

"Maybe Brick had some woman there and sent her outside when Miz Webb here showed up. Or she went outside on her own, so as not to be seen with Brick. Who would want to?"

"The owner of the white van," Bohannon said. "Sharon here saw it, too." The little woman nodded her cropped gray head. "That makes three witnesses now. You know of any woman of the type that would go with Brick Lightner who drives a white van? Or why he'd let some pickup from a tavern drive herself to his place?"

Gerard snorted. "Makes it too easy to leave."

"And when she got a look at that house inside," Sharon Webb said, "she'd want to leave. It's filthy."

"If it was the killer," Gerard said, "we need a motive. We know both Miz Webb and Eliot Dodson had it in for Brick, and why." He raised eyebrows at Bohannon. "Who else, Hack?"

Bohannon stared at him for a minute, then stood up. "You want to drive Sharon home?" he asked Gerard. "I just remembered something." He left the office at a run.

**H**e rapped the aluminum screen door, through which he could smell cooking. The sea breeze blew on his back. The sun glared off the fresh white paint on the stucco of the back of the building. A fat Mexican woman in an expanse of chili-smeared apron came and pushed open the door. He held out the picnic basket to her. "Thank Señora Hawes for this," he said. "The plates and tablecloth and glasses are inside." She smiled with marvelous teeth, and dimples showed in her terracotta cheeks. She nodded, and reached for the basket.

"I will tell her, señor," she said.

"And say I'm sorry I missed her," he said. "The meal was delicious. Did you cook it?"

The plump shoulders moved in girlish embarrassment and pleasure. "Sí, but the recipes, they are Meeses Hawes's."

"Where is she today?" Bohannon asked.

"You know her daughters? In Lompoc. The one who was just married a few months ago. And now she and her young husband, they have found a house. They wanted Meeses Hawes to come look at it and see whether it is right for them." The fat woman craned back to look at something. "She ought to be returning soon." The smile came back. "Thank you for the basket, señor."

"Thank you," he said, turned away, turned back. "Tell me. The other morning, the morning when Mrs. Hawes packed that basket for us—you remember?"

"Sí, señor." She nodded.

"A truck delivered bread to you from San Francisco," he said. "Is that right? Were you here to receive it?"

"Meeses Hawes," the woman said, "she live upstairs." She stepped out and pointed to a flight of steps that climbed to rooms over the restaurant. "They come with the bread very early. I am not yet here. She meets them and takes the bread inside here to put in warming ovens." A shadow of misgiving crossed the round face. The woman cocked her head at him. "But that morning, when I arrived, the bread was stacked outside here, on this step."

"Mrs. Hawes wasn't here to receive it?" Bohannon said.

"She came late that morning," the woman said. "I remember. How did you know, señor?"

"Not from upstairs," he said. "She came in her car, right? Where from, do you know?"

"Sí, it is as you say," the woman said. "But no, I do not know from where." A timer bell rang behind the woman in the kitchen. She gave a start and pulled the screen door shut. "You must excuse me now, señor. The cooking."

"Thank you," Bohannon said. He turned away, and the wind took his hat. He grabbed for it, missed, it hit the sandy earth and rolled along at the base of the wall. The wind was brisk, he lunged after the hat, it reached the corner of the building and disappeared. He rounded the building corner and grabbed the hat and sprawled. He was climbing to his feet, slapping the grit off his clothes with the hat, when a white van swung in to park beside the building. The driver was Dorothy Hawes. She saw him through the windshield, gave him a wave of her hand, and climbed down out of the van. Her smile was half wince against the brightness of the sun and the stiffness of the breeze.

"Why, Hack, how nice to see you again."

Bohannon went to her, and kicked the left front tire of the van. He said to her, "I guess not," and squatted, and from in front of the tire gathered up what his scuffed boot had knocked loose. He rose and held it out in his hand for her to look at. "You know what that is?"

"Kind of shiny." She was mystified. "Like seashell."

"Abalone shell," Bohannon said. "And there's only one place around here that's got a yard full of that, any more. Brick Lightner's." He walked around the truck now, stooping, digging with his clasp knife at the treads of the other tires. "This van was parked there the night Brick was shot. Three people saw it." He folded the blade into the knife and dropped the knife into the frayed pocket of his jeans. "Why did you do it, Dorothy? First kill the otter, and then—"

"Because they let him go," she cried. "That was all I meant to do. I never meant to take a human life. I'm not like him. I'm not, Hack. You must believe that. He killed my husband. He killed Bob, as sure as sure can be. You know that's true. And the court blamed the storm and let him off. Let him off scot free to drink and bully his life away."

"Easy, Dorothy." Bohannon put hands on her shoulders to try to calm her. She shook him off.

"I'm not like that. I thought if I killed the otter, he'd get his punishment at last. Then I saw on the TV news he had the wrong kind of gun and they had to let him go, and that's how it would always be, wouldn't it? The law would never get him. I told you the other morning, there is no justice. And you know that, Hack."

"No justice in murder," Bohannon said.

"I only went there to—" she wrung her hands, looked at the sky, turned with a jerk to look at the sea, tears streaming down her face "—I don't know, to tell him to his ugly face the awful thing he'd done to me, drowning my Bob, the lonely, drudging life he'd sentenced me to."

"And just by luck you saw the rifle in Sharon Webb's pickup? And there was a clear shot through the kitchen window, right between Brick's shoulder blades, and you decided there was justice, after all? And you were the instrument?" He stepped around the van, yanked open the door, climbed in, opened the glove box, found what he expected, got out of the truck. She was watching him. He held up a pair of driving gloves. "I guess not. You took

your own rifle, didn't you? But if you used Sharon Webb's and left it there, it would point suspicion completely away from you, right?"

"I didn't mean to get her into trouble," Dorothy Hawes wailed. "I'd have come forward to take the blame, Hack. Truly, I would. You see, both my girls are grown and married and secure now. Now I could do what I'd waited all these years—" She put her hands to her mouth and gave her head a frightened shake, her eyes wide, watching him. "No. I didn't mean that."

"You came back to kill him," Bohannon said. He jerked his head at the restaurant. "This was only a cover. You came back to kill Brick Lightner, and that was all you came back for." She seemed to lose starch all of a sudden. The tears that ran were tears of exhaustion. She swayed, and he stepped over to hold her up. "Come on," he said gently. "It's all over now." He led her toward his battered truck, helped her up into it, slammed the door. When he climbed in on the driver's side, she was slumped over against the door, cheek pressed to the dusty glass, gazing at the sea, if she was gazing at anything at all. He started the engine, let the brake go, turned the wheel. "You shot the otter, so you do own a rifle. Where is it?"

"I felt so sickened." Her voice was toneless with misery. "I hated myself for killing a helpless creature."

He wheeled the truck out onto the highway.

"I never wanted to kill anything again," she said.

"Nothing helpless, anyway," Bohannon said.

"The rifle's in the restaurant. Behind the counter, under the cash register." She was silent for a while as the truck rattled towards town. Then she said coldly, "He deserved to die," and that was all she said.

**H**e drove the crooked two-lane blacktop road over the mountains slowly, shifting down a lot. A horse trailer swung along behind the pickup this morning; its passenger was a gangly weanling who had never been trailered before. Rivera had rigged the trailer with a rail to hold him steady, but careful driving was needed all the same, no sharp turns, no abrupt stops and starts. It grew tiring. His muscles ached with tension and he sweated.

The tall, rambling old house with its white jigsaw-work verandahs stood quiet among the spring-green foothills. The windows reflected clear blue sky. When they got out of the truck into the stillness, a freshening

breeze cooled him. He unbolted the trailer door and let it down to serve as a ramp. Talking softly, he stepped up into the trailer and stood a while, stroking the colt's copper-colored coat. He took a handful of grain from a pocket and let the soft mouth of the colt lip it from his hand.

He unhitched the youngster and by the halter turned him around and led him down the ramp. His coat glowed in the sunshine. T. Hodges smiled. "Isn't he lovely?" she said. But Bohannon heard the closing of a door and looked toward the mansion. He had phoned ahead for approval of his plan. And there was Linda on the porch, a nurse with her. He took the halter and began walking the colt up the long lawn past the flowerbeds.

Linda didn't move. Maybe she was daunted by the outdoors, all that sunlit space in front of her. But as he neared the house, the colt nodding obediently beside him, he thought

she was watching. Not something dark and horrible in the past, but what was happening here and now. Then he was close enough to be sure her gaze was on the beautiful young animal who, when Bohannon paused, did a little quickstepping on his knobby legs.

"Linda?" Bohannon called. "Come see the colt."

She hesitated. She glanced at the nurse. The nurse smiled and nodded. Linda moved, stepped out, not quickly, almost as if walking were a new sensation. She reached the top of the long steps and halted. Worry flickered in her face for a moment, then passed, and she came down the steps. Slowly at first, then more quickly. She knelt on the grass, circled the neck of the little horse with her arms, and rubbed her cheek against the smooth coat. Her eyes shone. Then she saw T. Hodges, and got to her feet. She smiled.

"Hello," she said. "I'm Linda Bohannon."



# UNSOLVED

by  
*D. G. Wells*

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the November issue.

Rearrange these words to form an intelligible sentence, inserting punctuation and capitalizing words as necessary.

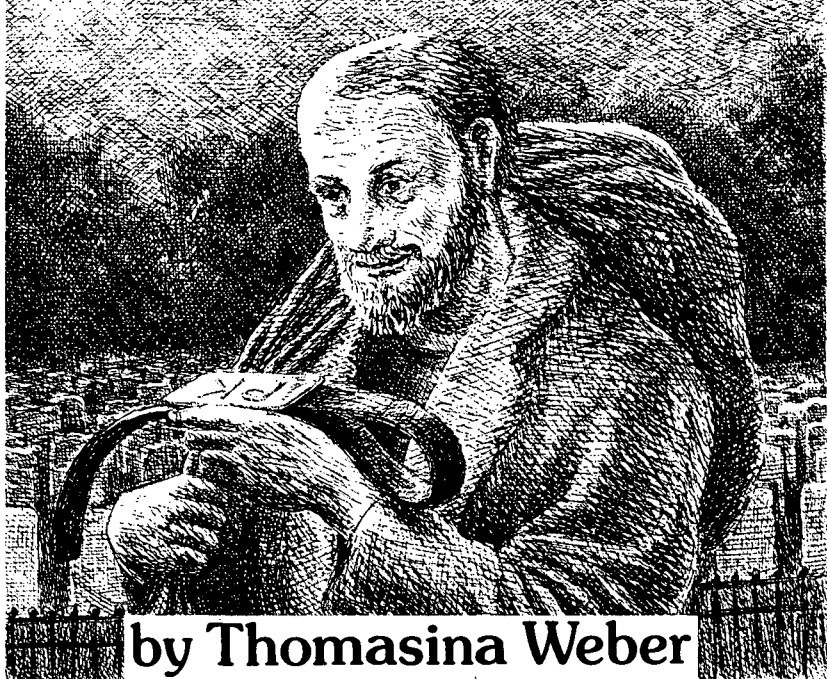
no but now more so chris chris chris kris criss chriss cross cross  
cross crosss crossed crossed crossing krised kissed kisses caress

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See page 149 for the solution to the September puzzle.

*"Chris's Kisses," taken from Recreations in Logic by D. G. Wells. Copyright © 1979 by D. G. Wells. Dover Publications, Inc., New York, N.Y.*

# Packer's Fortune



by Thomasina Weber

**I**t was almost daybreak as Packer, his empty burlap sack slung over his shoulder, set out from his shack in the woods. His mouth still tasted of the thick dry oatmeal he had prepared for breakfast and his tongue searched out hidden morsels as he made his way toward town.

The fog depressed him, as if it were the physical manifes-

tation of his loneliness, isolating him from the world. The woods were dripping with moisture and he shivered. As the years passed, it seemed to take him longer to get warm. It was too bad his profession demanded such an early start, but he could not pick through the refuse cans and dumpsters thoroughly if he was being jostled and bothered by a town

shifting into gear for the upcoming business day.

It was on mornings like this that he despaired of ever finding his fortune. His dream of the diamond, the priceless antique—whatever—and the recognition it would bring him blurred in the fog, just as his own image must be blurred if not invisible to the rest of the world. There comes a time in a man's life, he reflected, when it is no longer enough just to wake up still breathing.

As he passed the cemetery on his left, he performed his customary salute. "Morning," he said to the silent inhabitants. Packer had a great respect for the dead.

When he reached the clearing, he looked at the ground in awe. Had Tessie Kovak really seen a flying saucer here last week? For the past three months Mr. Kincaid, editor of the newspaper, had been listening to reports of sightings until he was ready to tear the phone out of the wall, or so he said. Too bad the first sighting had followed so closely the disappearance of the Kovak twins, Packer thought. In a quiet little town like Midville, it was sometimes hard to find anything to talk about of an evening. If the two occurrences had been spread out more, they would have been good for a year's discussion at

the Blue Light Tavern.

"Somebody claims to have seen a UFO, and before you know it the whole town is seeing them," Mr. Kincaid had been complaining ever since. "If I had known what I was starting, I would never have mentioned the one I saw. I swear on my mother's grave, a newspaperman doesn't know who to believe any more."

He was probably right, thought Packer. Chances are Tessie Kovak had seen nothing at all. She only wanted attention. Not that she didn't attract attention, with that switchy walk of hers and that way she had of standing real close to any man she happened to be talking to. But nobody talked to her for long. With eleven brothers—nine, he corrected himself, since the fifteen-year-old twins had disappeared three months ago—someone was bound to see them and tell her father, and no one, man or boy, wanted to tangle with hotheaded Joe Kovak. Now, if Tessie really wanted attention, what she should do was find her brothers' bodies.

Although the townspeople had searched extensively, their father refused to believe they were dead. "They run off, them ungrateful brats," Joe Kovak had said. "They thought they was too smart for their dumb

family! Well, they better not come crawling back to their old man for help, not if they know what's good for them."

Packer was inclined to agree with Joe's theory. The boys were exceptionally bright, making them intellectual outcasts. Even though they were incurable practical jokers who had selected Packer as their favorite target, he hoped they had freed themselves for a better future.

Packer had a lucky morning with the refuse barrels. He found a neatly-tied stack of science fiction magazines, his favorite reading matter. But on the way home, he found something even better. He had left the path and pressed into the underbrush to pick a handful of blackberries when he saw it on the ground, nearly covered by the fast-growing vines. It was a belt with the initials PK on the buckle. He remembered that belt; it had belonged to Pete Kovak, one of the missing twins. The boy had been proud of it because he had bought it with his lawn-mowing money. A dark line showed that it had been buckled in the end hole, which was now ripped as if the belt had caught on something.

Packer tucked it under his mattress when he got home. Maybe he could get the initials off and use it himself. Then he

untied the stack of magazines, anticipating the hours of reading pleasure ahead when he could be a hero, doing brave and wonderful things and knowing that no harm could come to him, for the end was already written.

**B**ut he read no more than one story that night. The following morning he entered the newspaper office, conscious for the first time of his shaggy beard, long hair, and filthy clothes. He would not look like this for long, he thought, his inspired plan warming his being. This town was in for a surprise when Elwood Packer, former scavenger, former nobody, suddenly became the most famous personage and assumed his rightful place in society. Elwood Packer would never be lonely again.

The wistful face of Tessie Kovak drifted across his mind and he offered her his mental apology. She had a lifetime ahead to make her mark; Packer had not. He was getting older and weaker and more discouraged and then—the magazine. Some higher force must have guided him to that particular story, and now here he was, filled once again with hope. Now that his future was so plain to him and so nearly within his grasp, he

wondered why he had wasted so many years waiting for his dream instead of doing something to achieve it.

The girl at the desk reluctantly summoned Mr. Kincaid. She seemed worried as the editor approached, but he gave her a reassuring smile and a wink before turning to Packer.

"What can I do for you, Packer?" The editor was a tall man in his mid-thirties, rather thin, a neat dresser. He did not smile often, but when he did, his teeth showed white and even in his angular face. This never failed to arouse envy in Packer, sending his tongue probing sorrowfully among the vacancies in his own mouth.

"I'd like to report—" The girl was watching him. He turned his back to her and lowered his voice. "—a flying saucer."

Kincaid groaned. "Not you, too!"

"I'm only telling you what I saw, Mr. Kincaid, but that isn't all. I saw people in it."

"People?"

"Well, sort of people. They were little. They wore shiny suits."

Kincaid sighed. "They always do."

"It was near the clearing where Tessie Kovak saw one last week."

"I don't think Tessie Kovak saw anything."

"Whether she did or not, that's where it was. It was hovering close to the ground, just above the trees."

"Okay, I'll make a note of it."

"Aren't you going to put it in the paper?"

"Not unless you see it again. If I were to write up every sighting that has been reported in these last three months, I wouldn't have room for the advertisements."

Dismissed, Packer turned to go, heavy with dejection. Behind him Kincaid and the girl began to talk in hushed voices. Her laugh struck him painfully as he closed the door. They thought it was a joke, just because it came from Packer.

It had not turned out this way in the story he had read last night. The man who found the saucer and was given a ride in it returned to tell his tale and he became rich and famous practically overnight. Of course, it was only fiction, but that's not to say it couldn't happen.

He felt a moment of fury. It just wasn't fair. If it had been the president of the bank who made the report, his story would be on the front page with his picture and everything. But since it was Packer, the rag-picker, it had to be backed up with proof, or at least by more than one sighting. All right, he thought as he shuffled back to

his woods, all right, Mr. Kincaid. I'm not licked yet.

Before dawn the next morning, Packer went to the clearing. He burned a round area of grass, being careful not to let the fire spread out of its circle. The grass was short and within a few minutes the fire was out. He surveyed his job with pleasure, then started for town.

"You say they were about to land when they saw you and changed their minds?"

"That's the way it looked, Mr. Kincaid."

The editor shook his head. "Two days in a row—"

"There's proof! I can show you."

"All right, we'll have a look."

Packer silently congratulated himself. Kincaid took a photographer along and they drove as far as they could, going the rest of the way on foot. Packer stood proudly by his burned area and waited for Kincaid's reaction. It was not what he expected.

"What is this supposed to prove?"

"Why, that shows they were about to land. They gave it the juice to change direction when they saw me." The photographer was snapping pictures of the ground. Kincaid seemed to be trying to make up his mind. "I was scared, Mr. Kincaid.

Those faces at the portholes—they were weird."

"What did they look like this time?"

"Well, it was hard to tell, it all happened so fast, you know. Their faces were something like ours, only flatter. I mean, if they stood sideways, they wouldn't have a profile. Know what I mean?"

He nodded. "Okay, Packer, I'll run it."

Packer was about to ask if they were going to take his picture, but he checked himself. He did not want to seem too eager, or Kincaid might suspect. And besides, he was not dressed for picture-taking.

Packer's name was mentioned, though, in the newspaper story and he was the center of attention the next night at the Blue Light Tavern, where he enjoyed one evening a week of companionship for the price of a glass of beer. Flying saucers were the main topic of conversation, but the Kovak boys' disappearance soon entered the discussion. When it did, something clicked in Packer's mind and an idea began to form.

He had been wondering if he dared claim he had been taken for a ride in a saucer. He had to have an unusual angle in order to rise above the common sightings by others, but a ride would mean reporting on the



interior of the ship and its operation and he knew he could not handle that. But the boys—that could be the answer! It was a short walk home, for his mind was crackling with excitement.

He decided to wait a couple of days before springing his surprise. It was a morning gloomy with summer rain when he hurried into town.

"I saw them!" he told Kincaid, "the Kovak twins! They were in the flying saucer!"

Kincaid stared at him. "Are you trying to tell me those boys were kidnapped by a spaceship?"

"That's right. It came again early this morning. I saw the boys looking out the portholes."

"Do you know how impossible that sounds?"

"Nothing is impossible, Mr. Kincaid, and I can't help how nutty it sounds. It's true and I can prove it." He pulled out Pete Kovak's belt and dangled it in front of the other man's startled eyes. "One of the boys threw this out the porthole at my feet."

Kincaid reached for the belt. He looked rather pale. "I wouldn't think portholes in a spaceship would open," he said.

"We don't know much about spaceships. All I know is what happened. It did open and the belt came out."

Kincaid shook his head. "There must be other people in town with these initials," he finally said. "Are you sure you didn't find this in someone's garbage can?"

Packer managed to look pained. "Would I lie to you, Mr. Kincaid, especially where the lives of two boys are concerned?"

Kincaid ran his fingertip over the initialed buckle, deep in thought. At last he spoke. "Suppose you leave the belt with me. I'll see if Mrs. Novak can identify it."

"No need to do that, Mr. Kincaid. I know it belongs to Pete. I remember when he bought it." He retrieved the belt.

"Let me think about your story for a day," Kincaid said, frowning.

"What's to think about, unless you don't believe me?"

"I'm not saying I don't believe you, Packer, but you must admit it sounds pretty far-out. If I back your story in the paper, I am putting my reputation on the line."

"I guess so. Well, you sleep on it, and I won't say anything until you give me the word."

Packer felt let down as he walked home. He'd been sure Mr. Kincaid would jump at the chance to publish such a remarkable story. Maybe that was the trouble—it had been

too remarkable. Then he fingered Pete Kovak's belt and his spirits lifted. Here was what they call concrete evidence and Mr. Kincaid could hardly ignore concrete evidence.

He spent the remainder of the day and the early evening reading his science fiction magazines. He did not trust himself to go to the Blue Light Tavern, not after promising to say nothing. As the evening wore on, it became increasingly difficult to concentrate on the magazine. He was restless, thinking about tomorrow when so much depended on the editor's decision. Finally he got up and stepped outside. Maybe a walk would relax him enough to enable him to sleep.

They don't have any trouble sleeping, he thought, nearing the cemetery. He gave a jaunty salute. "Evening," he said as he reached the gatepost. Just as he passed it, a light blinked out. He stood still for a moment, unable to move, then whirled and ran all the way home, slamming and bolting the door behind him. He dived into bed, not caring now whether sleep came or not, as long as nothing else did.

In the light of day the episode in the cemetery seemed less frightening. It had probably been a couple of young lovers or some mischief-makers.

Mr. Kincaid seemed glad to see him when he arrived. "All right, Packer, I have made my decision. I'm going to run your story." Packer permitted himself a restrained smile. "We don't understand everything about the universe," Kincaid went on, "and who am I to say something is impossible?"

Shortly after the paper came out, Packer's woods were filled with people trampling the terrain, poking around in the underbrush, peering through the window of his shack. Those who knocked on his door were readily admitted and Packer discovered he had no more time for his daily scavenging. It was just as well, though, for he had decided that since he was going to be a celebrity, he ought to look the part. The next morning while it was still dark he lifted a loose plank in the floor and removed a small metal box from the space underneath. Extracting several bills from the small hoard, he folded them into a square and put them in his shoe.

Two hours later he was a new man. He had treated himself to a shave and a haircut and even a manicure. He felt twenty years younger as he proudly carried the box containing his new secondhand suit. Just as he reached the newspaper office, the editor came out.

"I was on my way to see you," Kincaid said, more cheerfully than Packer had ever heard him speak. He must be selling a lot of newspapers. "I've got you signed up for three television spots."

"Television?"

"The first one is tonight, the six o'clock news hour. I'll pick you up at three."

Packer walked home in a daze. Television! Next thing you know, they would be after him to write a book. Well, why not? Less likely people than Packer had written books. It was a dizzying prospect. He had found his fortune at last—not in the bottom of a trash barrel but in the depths of his surprisingly creative imagination.

They arrived at the broadcast station with plenty of time to spare. Packer paid close attention as the newscaster briefed him while Kincaid sat back and listened, the proud father of it all. "We were disappointed when Mr. and Mrs. Kovak refused our invitation to appear," said the newscaster.

"They're oddballs," said Kincaid. "They didn't have a thing to say when the story broke. They just shrugged and went on about their business."

"Except for Tessie," said Packer, grinning. "I guess she's mad because she could have been sitting here instead of me

if Mr. Kincaid had believed her when she said she saw a flying saucer."

"Tessie?" said the newscaster, leaning forward.

"She's their daughter. Sixteen, but looks like twenty. And don't think the men don't notice it!" It was Packer's opinion she was not quite right in the head, always smiling the way she did, but he would never say that.

"When one sighting is reported, everything above the tree line becomes a flying saucer," said Kincaid.

But the newscaster was not to be diverted. "This Tessie, she plays around with the boys?"

Packer shook his head. "Not Tessie. Her father would kill her. She has never been out with a boy in her life. They're all afraid of Joe Kovak."

"Maybe I ought to interview her," said the newscaster.

"The family doesn't want publicity," said Kincaid.

"Maybe they don't, but Tessie does," said Packer. "I heard her talking the other day about having a try at Hollywood."

"Tessie always has been a dreamer," said Kincaid irritably, "and in an unhappy home situation it's only natural that—"

Suddenly the office door burst open and a flushed young man entered, his eyes popping with excitement. "We've got to cut

the creep from the show!" he gasped. "Some girl just found the bodies of those missing kids!"

Packer felt as if his being had shriveled so that he rattled when he moved, like a dried walnut in its shell. The incredible months had flown by and he had been unable to make anyone, including his court-appointed lawyer, believe that he had not murdered the Kovak twins. His possession of the belt, the only piece of evidence, was damning, because Jack Kovak's body wore a belt while Pete's did not. The condition of the belt indicated that it had been torn from the body, presumably while being dragged through the underbrush.

They built a convincing case against Packer. The twins, who were known to be inveterate practical jokers, had been plaguing him until he was nearly out of his mind. Packer had been forced to admit this was true, but he denied the allegation that, in a cunningly set up meeting, he had served them poisoned drinks, then buried them in the cemetery. The prosecutor told the jury that Packer, in an effort to conceal his crime, had concocted the fantastic story of the flying saucer kidnapping, intending to make a fortune into the bargain.

The voices of the prosecutor, the jury foreman, and the judge haunted him still, rising above the prison sounds, even above his own heartbeats. He would never stop hearing them. Not until tomorrow; then he would hear nothing at all.

"I wish there was something I could do for you," said Kincaid, leaning against the door of his cell.

Packer smiled wanly. "I guess there's nothing anybody can do for me now. All I wanted was attention, and look what it got me."

"It's a shame. If it hadn't been for Tessie trying to desecrate my mother's grave, the bodies might never have been discovered."

"I can't understand her doing a thing like that."

"She did it out of spite. It was just as you said—I believed you and not her. She wanted the publicity you were getting. She was uncovering my mother's coffin to put some kind of animal skull on it that she had found in the woods. It was the only way she could think of to hurt me."

"I'm sorry I made an enemy for you, Mr. Kincaid."

"You didn't, Packer. She has been apologizing to me and crying ever since. You made an enemy for yourself, if anything."

Tessie's plan was probably no more farfetched than his own had been, Packer told himself.

"That was a brilliant place to hide them," said Kincaid.

Packer's head snapped up. "What did you say?"

"I said that was a brilliant place to hide them. The bodies."

Packer stared at him. "You think *I* killed those boys and buried them in your mother's grave?"

"What else can I think?"

"But all this time you've been visiting me, I thought you believed me!"

"I did at first, but I've been doing a lot of thinking."

"But you're my friend, Mr. Kincaid! You *know* me!"

"When a person has lived alone as long as you have, Packer, it's bound to affect his mind. I would like to believe that you were temporarily insane when you killed and buried those kids."

"I'm not insane."

"All of us have moments of insanity, some briefer than others." He extended his hand. "Goodbye, Packer. I'm going to miss you."

Packer felt the foolish tears come to his eyes. To know that he was to die the next day was shattering enough, but to know that his one friend had deserted him was worse. Now he had nothing to take with him.

Through a blur, he watched Kincaid's tall figure retreating down the corridor.

It was nearly midnight when Kincaid parked beneath a heavy maple tree, the lighted drugstore ahead the only sign of life. At home his wife and children slept, unaware of his absence. His thoughts returned to Packer, as they had been doing ever since he left him that afternoon. Imagine, a whole lifetime spent and nothing to show for it, with no one to care whether he lived or died.

Not like Kincaid. Kincaid had his family, his future; he had everything to live for and now, thanks to Packer, he was absolutely safe. The ragpicker's death would satisfy the public's desire for vengeance and when he was buried, the Kovak case would be buried, too.

Packer thought he was leaving this world a worthless, futile man, but he was wrong. He would never know how much he had done for Kincaid. He would never know the Kovak boys for what they were, vicious little blackmailers, and he would never know the maddening effect their sister Tessie could have on a respectable married man.

Kincaid had started the flying saucer rumor to shift attention from the disappearance of the

boys, and then Packer had come along to help, however unwittingly. It had been a bad moment, though, when he produced Pete Kovak's belt. Kincaid had been in hell until he could get out to the cemetery that night to be sure the grave was still intact. Then, satisfied that it was, he doused his light, but not before Packer had seen it and fled.

On the walk home, cursing himself for his carelessness in not noticing the tearing off of the belt that violent night, he realized how innocently and perfectly Packer had guaranteed him a life free from fear. Who could prove the boys had not been taken by a spaceship? There were many documented cases where exactly that was believed to have happened. If he could convince everyone that this was another, he could forestall a renewed search, and Packer would be happy, thinking he had fooled Kincaid.

But then Tessie had almost ruined it all, not only shocking herself by finding the bodies but causing Kincaid hours of torment until he could come up with the means of protecting himself. He had agonized over the decision to sacrifice the old

man, but it was the only one possible.

Kincaid reached for a cigarette, but his pocket was empty. Getting out of the car, he walked to the drugstore. Ten minutes later he opened his car door and slid behind the wheel. She was already in the front seat, waiting. She was sitting very straight, her hands folded in her lap. When she turned her head toward him, he noticed the rigidity of her expression.

"Hello, sweetheart," he said softly, reaching for her and pulling her close. She remained unyielding in his arms as he stroked her long brown hair. "What are you nervous about, Tessie? I've got good news for you. It's about Hollywood."

"I heard about that," said the level voice of Joe Kovak. There was the cold touch of sharp steel on the back of Kincaid's neck. He froze, staring into Tessie's eyes, wild now with fear.

"My Tessie told me all about you and her and Hollywood," Joe Kovak went on. The blade of the knife pressed deeper. Kincaid felt a moistness on his neck and wondered if it was blood. He closed his eyes.

"Drive to the cemetery, Mr. Kincaid."



# She Looked Like a Million

by Karen L. Todd



I decided to marry Angela Villars the minute I laid eyes on her bottom line. In my ten years as a banker, I'd never met a single woman with such gorgeous assets.

That was in 1980, shortly after I'd been transferred to

Green Valley as vice-president of First National Fidelity Trust and Guaranty. I'd had my heart set on an opening in San Francisco, and getting sent to this hick burg didn't exactly strike me as a major career move—until I met Angela and her fan-

tastic financial statement.

Angela was already on the wrong side of forty, and I could tell right away she didn't work out with Jane Fonda. She looked to be about a perfect 24-36-36, euphemistically called pear-shaped. Her hair was cut in a do-it-yourself bowl style, but it was an attractive shade of chestnut that went well with her cordovan oxfords. I could see how she'd reached her present state of maturity without a gold band weighting down her left hand.

In her defense, though, look who she'd had to pick from. A crop of home-grown family boys, with a few local-yokel mechanics and truck drivers thrown in. No man with an ounce of ambition stayed in Green Valley.

Angela wasn't exactly a pushover, but let's face it, in those days I still had a full head of Sylvester Stallone hair. In fact, a lot of people used to mistake me for Sly. I was thirty-five then. Old enough to inspire confidence, but young enough that the sap of youth still coursed through my veins. And I'll be honest. I knew all the moves. Within six months, Angela had agreed to become Mrs. Joseph Moorehead.

The memory brought a little smile to my lips, which broadened as I studied Angela's latest balance sheet. Six million

and small change. Not bad for a woman who'd never left Green Valley. Except for those six months in 1962. Local gossip had it that she'd gone away to a home for unwed mothers. But Angela said she'd been attending real estate school, and I believed her. She'd started buying property soon after that and never stopped.

A hum of activity from the lobby broke my reverie. I glanced up and saw small groups of bank tellers chatting as they made their way toward the large glass doors. I didn't need to look at the digital clock on my desk to know it was the end of the business day.

My smile faded as I folded the financial statement and slipped it into my jacket pocket. Time to go home.

I stepped next door to Flower Time Florist and bought a dozen red roses. I could barely afford them, but I was staging a blitz campaign to make things right between Angela and me. The roses and the new financial statement ought to help soften the old witch.

The inside of my car was like a sauna, and sweat streamed down my face before I got the engine started. A searing Santa Ana wind blew from the air-conditioning vents. I hoped the roses wouldn't wilt.

Angela had the worst case of

cheap I ever saw. But I didn't know that until I'd moved into her dilapidated old farmhouse. Nothing had been maintained since she'd inherited the property. Her parents had died in the late 1960's within months of each other, and gossip had it that she'd poisoned them both to get the farm but I didn't believe that, either. Starved them to death, maybe.

I thought of Angela standing in the dark, old fashioned kitchen morning after morning sifting weevils out of the flour she insisted on buying in hundred pound bags. She never got them all. But that was nothing compared to the huge burlap bags of potatoes. Only yesterday I'd gone through the bin in the pantry digging out the reeking, drippy, rotten potatoes. It was enough to gag a maggot. Why had I thought of that? Now I'd never be able to eat dinner.

The breeze from the air-conditioning vents switched from hot to warm as I drove between the brick pillars into Meadowview Manor. Toy-strewn lawns surrounded the single story tract houses that had sprouted on the Villars farm since Angela had inherited it. A block ahead, the old Victorian, which she always referred to as her "estate," stood like an anachronism looming over the flat-topped boxes. White

gingerbread glistened in the late afternoon sun, contrasting with the slate-gray wooden exterior.

From this distance, it looked stately, even elegant. Well, why shouldn't it? I'd almost killed myself working on the house, and nearly everything I earned went into its restoration and maintenance. We'd been together close to seven years now, and Angie had yet to spend a penny of her own money.

I pulled into the driveway just as the air conditioner began working in earnest. I sat for a few minutes letting the cold air wash over me, bracing myself for the encounter to come.

Angela sat behind her desk in the parlor, recording rental receipts. The room was stifling, yet she wore a motheaten brown sweater over her housedress. I watched her gnarled fingers move slowly across the adding machine keys, then struggle to grasp a pencil. Only a few months ago, those fingers had been strong and deft. I could have felt pity for her if she hadn't brought it on herself...

... Too cheap to heat the house properly last winter, too cheap to see a doctor when she'd come down with strep throat, and still too cheap to see one when it had turned to rheu-

matic fever. I hadn't realized how sick she was until I'd almost lost her. Now she had crippling arthritis, a damaged heart, and God knows what else wrong with her.

I forced the resentment from my mind with thoughts of the financial statement in my pocket.

Angie didn't look up until I leaned across the desk and pecked her leathery cheek.

"How's my girl today?"

"You're late again. I suppose you've been off with some hussy." Behind dimestore reading glasses, her pale eyes flicked to my collar, then down to my pocket handkerchief.

The same old song and dance. I forced a smile and handed her the financial statement. "Only Dame Fortune. You're showing an increase of nearly two hundred thousand in the last quarter." I laid the roses on her desk. "Here's a little something to show how proud I am of you and how much I love you."

She ignored the bouquet and began perusing her balance sheet.

I felt vibrations on the floor and turned to see Marcy Atkins lumbering into the room. She looked like the Pillsbury Doughboy in drag.

Her eyes lit up when she looked into mine. "I thought I heard you come in, Mr. Moore-

head. Dinner is ready whenever you are." Her tone made it plain that dinner wasn't all she had ready.

I glanced at Angela, but she didn't seem to have heard.

"We'll be along in a few moments, Marcy." I suppressed the urge to throttle her and reached for the roses. "Please put these in water and set them on the dining room table."

She shoved her nose among the roses and looked coyly over the tops at me before turning. Her majestic hips swayed like a pendulum until the doorway forced her to slow the action.

I walked behind Angela's chair and massaged her shoulders while she finished reading her financial statement. Then, when she'd removed her reading glasses, I helped her to the tapestry love seat. Her familiar pear shape was gone now, and her wardrobe of second-hand clothes bagged around her body.

She shivered, even as I removed my jacket and tie. I sat beside her and pulled her toward me.

"Angie, baby, let's get married."

Her eyes were flinty. "Why would I want to marry a philanderer?"

We'd been over it before, dozens of times, but I was determined to get results before it was too late.

"Honey, that was six and a half years ago. You know I've been faithful since that one mistake."

She stiffened in my arms. "I don't know of any such thing."

Before her illness, she'd had occasional spells of playfulness. I'd pop the question and she'd smile and say, "Ask me again next month." But now she was dour and suspicious.

She exerted enough energy to pull away from me. "You're a cad, a fourflusher, and a fraud," she hissed. Her eyes bored into me. "I used to pretend you loved me, but deep down I knew you didn't. And now you're proving it. The only reason you'd want to marry a crippled old lady is for money. I won't be fooled any longer, Joe. The moment I married you, I'd be signing my death certificate. You'd strangle me in my sleep."

She was right, of course.

I decided to change tactics. "That's just your illness talking, sweetheart. But I won't try to pressure you."

If only I could erase that one night of my life.

Angela and I had applied for our marriage license and the notice was published in the newspaper. The only thing left to do was stand up before Judge Kramer in his chambers.

But my eye for beauty grew keen in those brief days before

the wedding. And Velma O'Reilly was a beauty. I needed just one more taste of the forbidden fruit before settling down with my overripe pear.

Angela caught us, of course. Velma had cost me about three million dollars an hour, and part of that time we were watching television.

Angela and I fought the rest of that night. But finally the prospect of losing face in her home town won out, and she agreed to a "trial marriage." For me, it was turning out to be the longest trial in history. We told Judge Kramer we'd eloped to Reno, but I wasn't sure he believed us. The rest of the town did, though, and she'd taken Moorehead as her last name.

I cleared my throat. "Strictly as your banker, darling, I must pressure you about making a will. You certainly wouldn't want the state to get all your hard-earned money. That's still years away, of course, but think how many millions you will have amassed by then."

I was lying through my teeth. Even with annual increases of six hundred thousand, she'd be lucky to live long enough to reach a net worth of eight million. "Darling, I'm not saying you should leave it to me. But at least make sure it goes to a few worthwhile charities," I said

magnanimously. Even Jim Parsons, her attorney, believed I was her husband. He would automatically draw up a will cutting me in for half, which would probably quell Judge Kramer's suspicions.

Of course I was gambling. Angela would cling fiercely to her pride as she had all these years, and not admit to Jim that we were never married.

Now Angela's eyes glistened with tears. "We both know I won't live much longer." Her lower lip quivered. "M-m-marcy tried to kill me again today."

"That's your illness talking again, pumpkin. Marcy is clumsy and stupid, but she's not trying to kill you."

"She put poison in my tea, but it tasted vile, so I spilled it on the floor."

I knew there was no use pursuing proposals and wills tonight. "Honey, everything Marcy makes tastes vile. Speaking of which, I'd better wash for dinner."

I'd tried taking care of Angela and the house myself at first, but it was just too much. After that, we'd gone through a succession of housekeepers, but even the hardest resigned after two weeks.

Then one day Marcy showed up at the door, suitcase in hand. I didn't have time to interview her, so I just explained her duties and hurried to the bank.

She'd looked baffled, but I'd since learned that was natural. Now Marcy had been with us three long, trying months, but she put up with the low pay and Angela's constant abuse.

The first time, Angela accused Marcy of trying to kill her with her own medication. I checked the supply of capsules in the plastic container and came up fifteen short.

When I confronted Marcy, she merely looked bovine and said, "I dropped some in the sink and they got all soggy, so I washed them down the drain."

Just to be on the safe side, I'd started portioning out Angie's pills each morning before I went to work.

A few weeks later, Angela accused Marcy of pushing her down the stairs. Angela received some nasty bruises, but miraculously, the fall hadn't seriously harmed her.

Giant tears slid down Marcy's cheeks that time. "I'm really sorry, Mr. Moorehead, but those stairs are so steep. I accidentally caught my foot and stumbled when I was helping your wife down."

I'd moved Angie to the downstairs bedroom after that, which meant Marcy had had to move to an upstairs bedroom, which meant that Angie accused us of making whoopee over her head. We weren't, but it wasn't any fault of Marcy's. I'd taken to

locking my bedroom door at night.

I didn't seriously believe Marcy had tried to kill her with poison today, but just the same I'd check the house before I went to bed tonight and throw away anything potentially lethal. Marcy might very well think d-Con was an herb. I often wondered how she'd reached the ripe old age of twenty-five.

I dried my hands, then ran a comb through my graying hair. The curl that used to flop forward onto my forehead was gone now, along with half an inch of hair on either side. Lines were eroding the flesh around my eyes, and my firm jawline was a thing of the past. Where had the sap of youth gone? When had it been replaced by little clumps of cholesterol meandering through my system, looking for likely places to settle down?

It was the stress. For the past six months I'd felt like I was walking a tightrope. Nothing that a few million dollars and a change of lifestyle wouldn't cure, though. Somehow I had to marry Angela before she died of natural causes or before Marcy unwittingly killed her.

Dinner was dismal, as usual. Angie was seated at the head of the table, and after I'd removed

the fat and cut her lamb chop into bite-sized pieces, I took my place at the foot of the table. The bouquet of roses in the center saved us from having to stare at one another.

While Marcy cleared the table, Angie and I watched television in the living room. But I noticed Angie wasn't responding to the sitcom. She seemed to have withdrawn into her own world.

"A penny for your thoughts," I offered.

I had to up the ante to a dollar before she acted like she heard me.

"I was just thinking . . . there must be a way to recycle toilet paper. We go through so much of it with Marcy here now."

"I'm sure if anyone can think of a way, you can, sweetheart."

She seemed to take that as a compliment.

I switched off the television and helped her to her bedroom. After she was huddled under the blankets, she reached a gnarled hand toward mine and said, "Joe, I want you to do something for me."

"Anything, darling. You know that."

"Start bringing toilet paper home from the bank. They'll never miss it."

"That's a good idea. I'll see what I can do." I kissed her on the cheek. "Goodnight and sweet dreams."



"Joe, I meant what I said. I'll never marry you."

I asked Marcy why there were rat poison pellets mixed in with the tea leaves, and she pointed out that there were also tea leaves mixed in with the box of rat poison pellets. "Like maybe they were making a trade."

When I returned from the trash can, Marcy was waiting for me.

"Those were beautiful roses, Mr. Moorehead. I noticed, even if *she* didn't."

"Yes, they are lovely. If you'll excuse me now, I'll just go watch a little more television."

Instead of moving out of my way, she advanced a couple of steps. I retreated until I was pinned against the kitchen range. Her lips were inches from my face.

"Why do you let her treat you like that? You're always doing nice things for her and bringing her presents, and all she does is quarrel with you. If you were my man, I'd treat you real good."

I squirmed sideways. "Well, I'm not your man. She's just a little testy since her illness. It happens to a lot of people."

She countered my move with her amply endowed hips. "She says you only stay with her because of her money. Funny, she doesn't look like she's got money.

In fact, she looks poor. Does she have a lot?"

I grabbed both her arms and shoved backward, using the stove for leverage. "She's comfortably fixed—not that it's any of your business."

Marcy finally yielded the right of way and I went upstairs and locked myself in the bedroom.

I've never slept well during a full moon, and tonight was no exception. If I could get Angela to marry me, my earnings would work out to about a million bucks for each year I'd invested in her. Not bad work if I could get it. Of course, the fringe benefits stunk, but I'd be able to make up for it later.

Assuming she outlived Marcy's stupidity, she was still on flimsy ground. One cold that turned into pneumonia—one overexertion that brought on a heart attack. That's all it would take.

Angie and I hadn't shared a bed since her illness, and I realized that might be part of her problem. She was probably lying awake night after night imagining Marcy and me up here. Maybe I should move downstairs with her. A little cuddling and romance couldn't hurt. A shiver of revulsion ran through me, but I decided to bite the bullet.

I put on my robe, tiptoed past Marcy's door, and groped my way down the staircase.

Angie's door was ajar. I pressed my fingers against it and took a quiet step inside, then stopped in my tracks.

Marcy's bulk was outlined in the moonlight, hiding Angie's head from me. Had she had an attack? My pulse quickened.

"What's wrong, Marcy?"

Marcy jumped as if she'd been hit by lightning, and as she moved, I could see the pillow pressed against Angie's face.

My feet turned to lead, and I could do nothing but stand in the doorway and stare at the still form on the bed. Blood pounded in my ears.

Suddenly the inertia left and I ran across the room, elbowing Marcy out of the way. I ripped the pillow from Angie's face and felt the side of her neck for a pulse. I breathed into her slack mouth until dizziness overcame me, but it didn't work. The life had gone out of Angela Villars.

Filled with a red, copper-tasting rage, I turned to face Marcy.

She stumbled backward against the dresser, her hands clasped. Her wet cheeks glistened in the moonlight. "Please, please understand. I had to kill Mother, for both of us. She was the Wicked Witch of the West."

Oh God, I had a dead woman

and a crazy woman on my hands at the same time. My mind raced, and an ice cube of fear formed in the pit of my stomach.

"... and I lived in lots of foster homes, but nobody ever loved me, so I never got adopted. When I was little, the first time I saw *The Wizard of Oz* I knew my mother was the Wicked Witch. Otherwise, she wouldn't have left me." Marcy wiped her nose on the sleeve of her robe.

Part of what she'd said began penetrating my brain, and I remembered the rumors about Angie's going to a home for unwed mothers. But, *Marcy*?

"But when I got older, I learned about how girls get in trouble and sometimes they can't take care of the babies and even though they love their babies they have to give them up for adoption. And I decided that's what had happened to my mother. Even though it broke her heart, she'd had to give me up, give me a chance to live with a family who would love me and take good care of me. She didn't have any way to know I'd never be adopted." She paused to snuffle and gasp for breath.

"Marcy, are you sure Angie was your mother? There's no family resemblance."

She nodded. "I went to an agency and they helped me find

her. I have my birth certificate." Then, defiantly, "And I'm glad I don't look like her."

"But why didn't you tell us? You've been here three months."

"That's why I came here. To meet my mother who loved me, even though she had to give me up. I wanted to surprise her. But then you answered the door and thought I was the new housekeeper and I found out she was so sick and I thought if she knew who I was, she'd try to do nice things for me and maybe make herself sicker. So I decided I'd wait till she was better, but until then I could take care of her and do all the things a daughter would do."

I grabbed a handful of tissues from the box on the nightstand and thrust them toward Marcy. "In case you haven't noticed, most daughters don't murder their mothers."

She honked loudly. "But she wasn't a real mother. I knew that after I'd been here a little while. She was mean and spiteful and she always had been and always would be and she never loved either one of us. And you were so good and kind and never had a mean thought in your life and she didn't de-

serve you. Then she told me she was rich and I decided to give you a present. You deserve every penny she had."

That jolted me back to reality.

"Marcy, you imbecile, your mother and I were never legally married. I won't see a red cent." Only by superhuman effort did I keep my clenched fists from striking out.

"But you lived together a long time. Isn't that the same as . . ."

"Not in California."

"Oh." She snuffled into a tissue, then balled it up and stuffed it into her pocket. "Well then, does that mean I get her money?"

"No, you idiot, because I'm going to call the police. You can't inherit from someone you've murdered." I stared at Angela's still form on the bed, pulled the sheet over her head, and walked toward the door.

Marcy grabbed my arm. "Wait, Mr. Moore . . . Joe. If you don't call the police and I get the money, then maybe someday you and I could get mar . . ."

I began to see the family resemblance.

FICTION

# Moral Dilemma



by Elana Lore

ODBERT

Illustration by Jim Odbert

123

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I decided to go straight about a year ago, only it wasn't really my idea. And now I'm in even worse trouble.

It started this one night. Raul and I went to a party in the Canyon. This producer was giving it, and we wanted to check him out because we hadn't gotten too much work lately, and we heard he was going to be doing a new film soon where he could use some young, okay-looking guys.

There were these big bowls of reds out by the pool, so I took a handful, and put some more in my pocket for later. There was a lot of nose candy going around, too. Raul and I did a couple of lines, but it wasn't as good as the stuff we usually got.

I don't remember too much after that, but the next morning, I found myself lying on this beach, only I had all my clothes on, and I was sort of paralyzed—the only thing I could move was my eyes. The tide was coming in and I could feel it squishing around my Gucci loafers, which I could see that I still had on, too.

I was lying there thinking maybe I was dead, and starting to feel really sorry for myself, when the sun started to like stab me in the eyes, which I thought were probably going to explode out of my head soon, and I realized that either I was

partly still alive, or this was what hell was.

Just then, my life started to flash before me.

I had been in L.A. about a year. At first it was okay. Mother had given me some money to live on, and I just sort of hung around, going to some casting calls and stuff when I felt like it. I did get a couple of jobs. I was in that weird underwear commercial with the sand and the baby oil, and then I was this kind of alien creature for a kid's cereal where you couldn't even see who I was, and the costume gave me a rash.

Unfortunately, Mother got the idea I was settling down, so she cut me off. Then I met Raul at a casting call. He's about my age, and he's from some South American country. I don't know which one, but he gets really pissed if anybody calls him a Mexican or a wetback or anything. He'd been in L.A. for a while, so he knew the ropes.

Raul and I started doing some dealing on the side to pay the rent, mostly coke, which was pretty profitable when we could get it, and then when we couldn't, we got into some other stuff that I sort of fast-forwarded through because I wasn't really proud of it.

I had been getting sort of weirded out in the last couple of months. Some stuff I had au-

ditioned for when I first came out here was starting to be released, and I was noticing that all the really good parts had gone to these guys about eighteen who looked like they lifted weights in their sleep. Also, I wasn't sure but either narcs were hanging around everywhere or I was starting to get paranoid.

When I finished with the home movie of my life, I opened my eyes all the way, but the stabbing pains were even worse. I thought, God, just let me live, and I'll go straight for a while, I promise. Only I wasn't sure how you did that.

I started thinking about Sunday school, and how everyone in the Bible got these callings. If I had had one, I had probably ignored it, especially if it required any kind of hard work, which wasn't in my nature.

So I'm lying there, thinking if I really am alive, and it was starting to look like I was, I hope I get unparalyzed before the reds in my pocket get soaked or I get busted for a public nuisance or something and someone finds them there. And then I start hearing these voices, but they don't sound like angels—more like whiny old people—and it makes me really annoyed.

These two old ladies have plopped themselves down not far away, and they're putting

suntan lotion on their really lumpy bodies, and complaining about how their kids don't call and stuff. I figure they must be around eighty or ninety or something because they really shouldn't be out in bathing suits so everybody can watch their veins collapse and everything—I mean, it's really disgusting—and then it occurs to me if they're that old, then their kids must be like around sixty, and that really blows my mind.

This old guy comes out, I see, and he's sitting not too far from them, and suddenly this one lady starts giving the other the big brushoff and heads down the beach toward him. So it gets really quiet and I close my eyes, and then suddenly I see this giant clump of shade over me. The old lady is standing over me and she's saying, "I think your shoes are getting wet."

I don't move, of course, so she sighs and hikes me up under the armpits and pulls me back about a foot. She starts talking, and every few minutes she moves her stuff back up out of the surf, then grabs me and pulls a little more. So she ends up huffing and puffing, and I'm still not talking, just sort of grunting every once in a while, but no, it doesn't faze her a bit. She just keeps on talking, like nothing out of the ordinary is happening.

By the time I feel some signs of life in my legs, and I really have to pee bad by then, I know the whole story of her life. I don't know what to do except act polite like I'm listening so she'll keep moving me out of the water. So I keep saying "Uh-huh," like Dr. Grossberg, who was my therapist in New York, used to do every week in my sessions.

This woman, Sophie Schwartz, well, her stories aren't any better than the ones I used to tell Dr. Grossberg, so I get to where I'm just making noises every once in a while, but I'm not really paying attention.

Sophie tells me I'm getting sunburned and invites me to her house for lunch, which is a nice condo a couple of blocks north of the beach. By then I'm feeling a little bit better, so I say okay, and only have to crawl a few feet to a bench to raise myself up. I guess Sophie is used to being around really old people because she doesn't even notice that I can't walk too well.

Sophie turns out to be okay, just lonely now that her husband died. I guess you get used to having somebody around. After I eat something, my brain starts working again, and I start getting paranoid. Like, where is Raul? Sophie lets me use her phone, but there's no answer at his place. I leave

about three because I think that I maybe left my car somewhere it might have gotten towed away.

I walk around the beach for a couple of hours looking, and finally find it. But while I'm walking, I notice there are a lot of old ladies around here who look lonely like Sophie. I start thinking about that, and how I can make a buck off it, and I get some really weird ideas.

That evening I hang around the Strip looking for Raul, who shows up about eleven and tells me I went off with some blonde chick right after we snorted the coke.

I tell him I need to do one last deal with him and then I'm going straight. Raul says he thinks that's cool, even though he acts like he doesn't believe it, and so we get this Colombian stuff that's dynamite and by the weekend I'm solvent again.

This idea of mine—well, everybody in L.A. has some kind of shtick, and besides, this is performing a valuable public service so I figure what the hell. I decide to be a sort of paid listener to all these old people. I have plenty of experience from my years with Dr. Grossberg, and I figure, what kinds of problems could old people really have, besides worrying about their kids and what to do with all their money?

I decide to change my name



to something that would look good on the diplomas I have this guy make up for my walls, get some new threads, and buy a pair of horn-rimmed glasses with fake lenses in them.

Within a month Dr. Gilbert Reeves, a.k.a. me, has established a practice in geriatric psychotherapy, which I looked up in the dictionary at the library. I got an office near the beach with paneling and books like Dr. Grossberg's, hired a secretary, and had these little printed announcements about my new practice made up. Of course I send one right away to Sophie, who I figured out can't see too well, and probably wouldn't recognize me again.

Before too long my appointment book is filled. I am chuckling up my sleeve, of course, because I think, well, what could be so easy?

After a few months, my bank account is looking pretty good. I've just bought this house in Malibu and I'm starting to get invited to some better parties when, all of a sudden, things take a sudden turn to the left.

I run into Raul one Saturday when I am out at the marina. I have given up drugs completely, which makes me sad, but it doesn't go with my image any more, and besides, we've all got to grow up sometime. He is doing another deal, and I am looking for a boat to buy. Raul

has a suntan and he looks happy, and I realize that I am no longer having fun, sitting and listening to old people talk about their digestive problems and stuff.

I am getting pretty good at discreet doodling and pretending to listen, but what I am doing is pretty boring and I wonder why Dr. Grossberg would have spent all those years in college and stuff just to hang around and listen to people complain.

Then one day, in the middle of Mrs. Graves' hour, I realize she has finally said something interesting. Amanda Graves is a widow and one of my younger patients. She's only about sixty, and she looks okay. Unlike most of the others, she still gets around a lot. Suddenly she starts telling me this weird stuff about having an affair with this married guy. I think she maybe is reminiscing about the old days, but no, she is telling me about something that happened last week. I didn't know old people even thought about sex, much less did it. And to hear Mrs. Graves tell it, she is getting more than I am.

I try to be cool, but instead of doodling, I am listening like crazy, taking down all the details, because some of it is pretty interesting, and who knows when I might need to know how to sneak around. Also, I think

I may have heard some of it before.

I start listening to all my patients more carefully, and I realize that the husband of Mrs. Delmont, my eleven o'clock on Thursdays, who has been complaining that he has been wandering off and she thinks he is getting senile, is named Bob, same as the guy Mrs. Graves has been seeing on the sly.

Over the next couple of months I take notes, and I find out that I am right. It is Bob Delmont. Suddenly I get real interested in my work.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Sanders, my ten o'clock on Tuesdays, who was pretty old anyway and sort of said the same stuff every week, bought the farm, and I had to go to my first funeral.

Several of my patients were there, so I tried to act dignified. Those acting lessons really came in handy. I spot Mrs. Graves and the Delmonts, who are sitting about as far from each other as they can get. I look at Mrs. Graves, but she's cool. She never once looks at them.

Mrs. Sanders, who didn't have any relatives she talked about, left me some money in her will, I find out later. It's not a whole bunch, but I do get my boat paid for and I have some left over, which I go to a stockbroker with and invest.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Delmont

misses a couple of sessions so I lose track of what her husband is up to, and I later find out that she's been in the hospital with food poisoning. It makes me a little bit suspicious, but there has been a lot of that lately with the seafood, so I think maybe I'm just over reacting.

Then, about two weeks later, Amanda Graves comes in for her session and tells me that she is moving to San Diego in about a month and won't be coming any more. I ask how things are going with her gentleman friend and she says they have broken up, but she doesn't seem too upset about it, which makes me suspicious.

Now, I have not been an angel during this time. I have thought about blackmailing Bob Delmont, just to add a little excitement to my dull and respectable life, but I'm not sure that Amanda Graves has told anyone but me about her affair, so I decide not to, at least for a while. I don't really need the money now.

Mrs. Delmont comes back the next week for her usual session, and she looks like someone flattened her with a rolling pin. She has lost a lot of weight, not to mention her tan, and she mostly looks green. When she tells me that she and Bob have decided to move down the coast to San Diego and this will be

her last session, the little hairs rise on the back of my neck, but of course I can't say anything to her.

I sit in my paneled office and try to think about this the way Dr. Grossberg would. With the food poisoning, and everybody thinking about moving back to San Diego at the same time, I begin to think that maybe Amanda Graves and Bob Delmont have not really broken up, and that maybe Mrs. Delmont is going to become fish food somewhere off the Pacific Coast Highway.

But what can I do about it? If I were a legitimate therapist, I wouldn't be able to go to the police or anything because I would have to keep everything people say to me in confidence, right?

But on the other hand, since I'm not, I could go, except then the cops might decide to investigate me, and then they'd find out who I really am. Which is not Gilbert Reeves.

I like Mrs. Delmont. But then I also like my house, and my Porsche, and the boat, and the respect I get from people, and the way Delia, my new girlfriend, who is not too bright but has a dynamite body, looks up to me.

I think about calling the police anonymously, but then I think, what if Amanda Graves hasn't told anybody but me that she was seeing this guy? The two of them sooner or later are going to figure out where the information came from, and then I'll either have to keep looking over my shoulder, or move.

And then I think about the way it was when I was hanging around with Raul. I don't even remember seeing any old people until that day on the beach. It was like they were invisible or something. So what happens if I tell the cops and they don't believe me, or they don't care? After all, old people die all the time.

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MYSTERY CLASSIC

# The Missing Passenger's Trunk

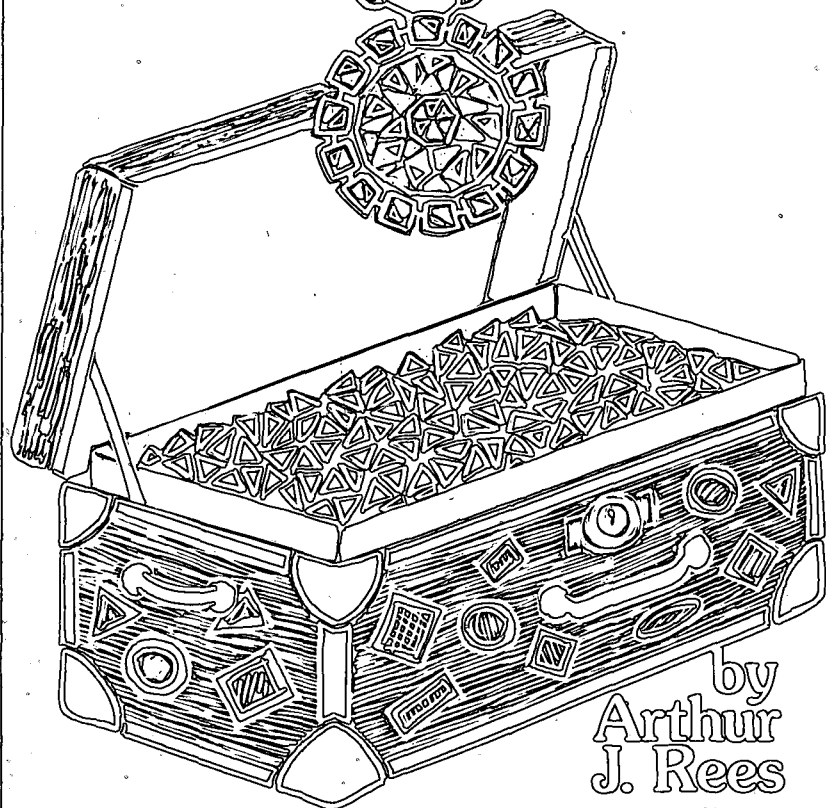


Illustration by Joanna Roy

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Dining apart in the station hotel after a stormy Channel crossing, I glanced down the amusements column of the evening newspaper the waiter had brought. But, in truth, it did little to help me to decide how to spend the first night of my return to my native land. I did not care particularly for any of the plays advertised; for a boxing match at the National Sporting Club I had still less desire. And yet I shunned the prospects of a solitary evening with my own thoughts for company. What was I to do?

I stared dubiously into the blackness outside. My corner table was by a window, and through a chink in the drawn curtains I could see that the night was both foggy and wet. The street was plunged in gloom except for the foggy electric standards, and the faces of hurrying pedestrians drifted past the blurred window as pallid and phantasmal as a procession of disembodied souls. But, at least, they were bound somewhere, while I, in that cheerless public dining room, was at a loose end. The other diners had departed, and I was now left there alone. Staring fixedly at the rainstreaked strip of window, I sat on.

It may have been the chill reminder of the weather that turned my thoughts to Colwin Grey. We had not met since the night when that infamous scoundrel, Dr. Penhyrn, cast himself headlong into a hissing Cornish sea, and Grey afterwards revealed the full measure of his iniquity to me in the dead man's lonely house.\* That sinister adventure had happened three years before—not a great space of time, even in the span of human life; yet how much, in my own life, had come to pass since! My wife had died within six months of our wedding day, and since her death I had spent a solitary and wandering existence abroad. Only three years! Incredible to think that so much happiness and loneliness and horror could be packed into such a brief period of time.

It was with the singular feeling of re-living in the past that I remembered Cornwall—and Grey. During the last three years Grey had not been much in my mind, but now I was back in England again. I wondered if he yet lived in the ancient legal court near Holborn, where the sparrows twittered in the plane trees of the old flagged square. How well I recalled it, the peaceful court, the paved walks, the grey houses looking down on trees and lawn; such a place as you may find in London and nowhere else, almost as remote and secluded from the throb of London life as a part of the Essex Downs, and yet in the very heart of things. But of course Colwin Grey was still there! It was difficult to think of him anywhere else.

\* "The Threshold of Fear."

In my mind he was as inseparably associated with that spot as the memory of Dr. Johnson is with Fleet Street.

And, suddenly, there came to me the desire to go and see him. We had been friends in former days, many years before, when I was a law student living in chambers, and he was in the first flush of that wonderful success which brought him the income of a successful K. C. In those days this rather surprised me, but I have learnt wisdom since. For if the orthodox legal path leads to fortune, why should fortune be denied a barrister who devotes his life to the search for truth? So the image of Grey beset me. I seemed to have a vision of him sitting alone over his dinner in the front room which stood behind iron railings and a three-cornered bit of a garden—the quietest room in London, I always thought it—waited on by the admirable Thorpe. And a wish, almost a longing, seized me to see him again.

And why not? To reach my old friend's chambers from Victoria was easy of accomplishment, and I was always sure of a warm welcome if he happened to be at home. It might be that he was out of town on one of his professional investigations, though I could ascertain that by ringing him up on the telephone. But I preferred to take him by surprise. At all events, there was nothing to prevent me going over to Holborn to see.

I ran up to my room for my hat and coat, descended, and left the hotel. The rain had ceased, and the yellow pall of the fog was lifting, so I determined to walk. From Victoria Street I crossed to the Strand by Trafalgar Square, and made my way towards Holborn through familiar side streets. As I walked, reminiscences crowded thick around me, and past adventures with Colwin Grey lived before my eyes. It was in this quarter we had chased the notorious Red Vidal through the dingy precincts of Long Acre and Covent Garden, finally running him to earth in an underground passage near the Thames. And here, too, Grey had tracked to his dismal lodgings in Little Earl Street that wretched creature Morby, whose murder of Anthony Winderton, the distinguished Imperialist and statesman, Grey defined as a "psychological crime."

Absorbed by these memories, I reached Holborn almost unconsciously, and turned down the dimly-lit thoroughfare in the direction of Gray's Inn Road. A light on the opposite side of the way showed me the old wine tavern with the narrow paved alley adjoining. I passed through the alley-way to Gables Court.

It was all silence and darkness within, and from dim doorways brooding shadows seemed to nod at me as I went by. The old build-

ings huddled behind railings housed a nest of lawyers in daytime, but they were all empty and deserted now, unless the ghosts of dead litigants wandered within. Grey's chambers were in a house around the corner, in a smaller court where the plane trees grew. As I drew near I saw that the upper portion, occupied in the day as legal offices, was plunged in darkness, but light gleamed from the ground window underneath.

Footsteps sounded in the hall in answer to my bell and the door was opened by Thorpe: a Thorpe unchanged by the passage of time, with the same carefully-trimmed side-whiskers, the same full eye of unctuousness, mingled with a wary experience of life. By the hall light he recognized me, and his plump bland face testified decorous approval.

"Good evening, Mr. Haldham. A pleasant surprise, sir! Will you come in?"

"Is Mr. Grey at home, Thorpe?"

"Yes, sir. He has just finished dinner. He will be glad to see you, I know."

Thorpe took my hat and coat, and preceded me to the familiar room where I had spent such pleasant nights, and quietly opened the door. "Mr. Richard Haldham, sir," he announced, and turned away.

Colwin Grey, unchanged, keen-eyed, thin-faced, restless and eager as of yore, sprang up to greet me, his dark eyes alight with a pleased surprise. He gripped my hand, and there was an unspoken sympathy and welcome in his smile which made me feel less lonely at once—the greeting of a man who understood.

"I am glad to see you, Haldham!" he said. "Take your old chair by the fire and tell me: are your wanderings over?"

"For the present, at any rate," I replied. "I returned from the South of France today—to London, and a November fog, but I have no immediate plans."

He eyed me attentively.

"You're not looking very fit, Haldham, and an aimless life in a London hotel is hardly likely to do you much good. If you have nothing better in view, why not come and stay with me here?"

"Thanks awfully!" I said gratefully. "You are very kind, Grey, but I did not come to London to impose myself on you."

"It won't be imposing, my dear fellow. I shall be glad of your company, and you will be doing me a favor. A little companionship will be good for both of us, and Thorpe will be pleased to take you under his wing."



"I'm glad to hear it," I responded gaily; "and if that's the case I'll be delighted to stay with you."

"Excellent!" he replied. "I'll send Thorpe to the Victoria for your luggage, and then we'll have a game of chess together, just to remind us of the old days."

So it was that I found a homecoming with Colwin Grey and a restful change from the chill loneliness of a strange hotel, sitting at ease in a cosy room with curtains drawn, the fire making a leaping checker of red and white on the carpet at our feet. The chessmen were set out, but remained disregarded on the board. We were too absorbed in talk to disturb their battle array; many questions to be asked, and experiences to be exchanged. The lights, the fire, the pleasant room, and, above all, the company of Colwin Grey added zest to the first happy evening I had known for years.

Time passed rapidly as we sat thus, and the thin strokes of a clock chiming eleven in the distance astonished me by the lateness of the hour. Hard upon it came another sound in the stillness of the court outside. Colwin Grey, telling me of a recent tragic and subtle case of his, heard it, too, and stopped to listen. It was like footfalls following sharp and fast, as of a man running around the square for a wager. Twice they ceased and recommenced, each time coming nearer. There was something weird and strange to me in that unseen approach, but Colwin Grey only listened intently. Again the footsteps died away, then sounded loudly on the flagged path outside. The next moment the doorbell rang. I exchanged glances with Grey.

"Our caller has been striking matches to look at the numbers on the doors as he came along," he said, with a smile. "That accounts for the pauses as he ran."

We heard the voice of Thorpe in parley at the door. Then he entered to us with a troubled face.

"There's a person in the hall who says he must see you, Mr. Grey."

"Who is he, Thorpe?"

"He would not give me his name. He's in a great mental tumult, sir, and acts like a demented being."

"You had better bring him in."

Thorpe bowed austere and withdrew, to return almost immediately with a short and thick-set man of middle age. The appearance of the visitor suggested the sea, and his blue serge suit was well made and smartly cut. His bearing might have been frank and engaging and seaman-like if it had not just then been that of

a man in mortal extremity of terror. His bronzed cheeks were blanched, and his blue eyes were widened with the scared look of one who had beheld terrible things. Breathing heavily, he stared at us in silence for a moment, then plumped down on a chair and closed his eyes. I was taken aback at this strange behavior, but Colwin Grey said, quietly:

"You have come fast and far, my friend."

"Aye; and so would you with the gallows striding at your heels," was the retort. "Is your name Grey—Colwin Grey?"

Grey nodded.

"I've come from Essex in the hope that you may be able to help me. I once read a story about you, and when this terrible thing happened I was in despair until I remembered your name. Then I took train to London, and came to your house. But I don't know that it's any use, after all. No one can save me from—from—" He broke off, the picture of despair.

"From what?" asked Grey.

"The hangman's rope," was the reply. Our visitor fingered his shirt collar nervously, as if he already felt the vengeance of the law impeding his circulation.

"If you have committed murder, no human skill can avail you," said Grey.

"But I haven't. As God is my judge, I'm an innocent man," said the other vehemently. "But the evidence against me is too damning and awful for anyone to believe me, let alone help me."

"You had better tell your story and allow me to judge of that," replied my friend.

"I am almost afraid to speak—to confide in anybody," was the hurried reply. "My story is too strange—too incredible—to be believed."

"If you are innocent you need have no fear, and it is possible that I may be of service to you. Why did you come to me, otherwise?"

Our visitor put his hand to his head, like a man in mental perplexity.

"You are right," he said. "I came here for that purpose. You must excuse me, Mr. Colwin Grey, but I have had a most awful shock. However, I will tell you everything, in the hope that you may be able to help me."

He drew his chair round a little, looking at both of us.

"My name is Masters—Captain Samuel Masters," he commenced. "I don't suppose you've ever heard of me, but I'm fairly well known in my own walk of life, which is the sea. I command

the steamer *Whiteaway*, an intermediate of ten thousand tons, Green Star line, trading between Tilbury and Dominion ports in the wheat-carrying trade."

"What do you mean by an intermediate?" asked Grey.

"A cargo-carrier with accommodation for a few passengers—twenty, thirty, perhaps more. The *Whiteaway* has thirty passenger cabins, always bespoken in advance. Some people prefer traveling this way to a high-class liner, where they have to dress for dinner and conform to a more conventional etiquette. The intermediate is more free and easy. The *Whiteaway* has always been a popular boat in this respect, for I do my best to make my passengers comfortable.

"This homeward voyage the *Whiteaway* carried a full complement of passengers—globe-trotters, two Australian wool kings, some English ladies who had been to Rotorua for the hot springs treatment, a party of English sportsmen back from deer-stalking in the Wairapa, and an Anglo-Indian named Colonel Rackham, who had spent six months hunting sea lions in the Chatham Islands.

"We had a smooth passage across from Fremantle to Africa, and at Durban, where we coaled, another passenger came aboard, for whom a cabin had been reserved by a cable sent to the ship's agents at Wellington. He was Mr. Reginald Maitland, a wealthy collector, returning to England after traveling around the globe in search of curiosities. He had been to China for tourmalin and to the South Seas for pink coral, then across to Auckland after kauri-gum curios. In New Zealand he read in the newspapers of some prehistoric reptile supposed to have been seen in an East African swamp, and he took the next boat to Africa to look for it. These things he told us before he had been aboard an hour, and, of course, he had to stand a lot of joking from the sportsmen about the prehistoric reptile he hadn't shot, but he didn't seem to mind that a bit. He was a very pleasant little man, with taking ways, and he soon made friends with everyone. I took a liking to him at once, and there sprang up a kind of friendship between us. He'd come on the bridge for a cigar and a talk, and yarn of the queer places he'd been in—at Lhasa, the forbidden city, for a silver Buddha, among the cannibals of Solomon Islands after a witch doctor's pointing bone, and so on. I know some out-of-the-way corners of the earth myself, but my experiences were nothing to Maitland's, who, according to his own account, seemed to have been everywhere a man might set his foot. He told me that his next expedition was to South

America, where he was going to procure one of those small and shrunken human heads mummified by a process known only to the head hunters of the Amazon.

"After we passed Teneriffe, I observed a change in Maitland, and being pretty friendly with him by this time, I asked him what the matter was. He told me he had had a curious kind of a vision a night or two before, in which a white-clad figure had risen from the surface of the sea to warn him that he was doomed to die before he reached England. I laughed at him for allowing himself to be affected by a dream, but for the rest of the day he was noticeably gloomy and depressed. And after dinner that night, when I was leaving the saloon to go on deck, he took me aside to ask me if he might speak to me alone in his cabin.

"I went with him to his stateroom. When we reached it, he bolted the door and told me in a low tone that he was still worried and upset about his dream, and he asked me to promise that if anything happened to him I would take charge of the box of curios in his cabin. He wished me to take them home until I could communicate with his only living relative, a sister living in North Wales, whose address he gave me. I endeavored to rally him into a better frame of mind, but he seemed to have lost heart; so, in order to lessen his despondency, I promised, if occasion arose, to take his trunk to my house until I had an opportunity to forward it to his sister. He appeared very much happier and relieved at this assurance and thanked me warmly, informing me that I had taken a great load off his mind. We then left the cabin together.

"Perhaps I should tell you—not that it has any bearing on what happened afterwards—that while in the stateroom he opened his trunk and showed me some of the curios he had been collecting in his travels: a green-stone *tiki*, some wonderful snakeskins, a carved mother-of-pearl bird with ruby eyes—things like that. But what interested me most was a kauri-gum curio showing a small model of a fully rigged ship within. I had never seen so curious a specimen, and admired it greatly. When Maitland saw that I was taken with it, he insisted upon making me a present of it. I did not want to accept it, but he begged me to keep it as a memento of his pleasant voyage on the *Whiteaway*, adding that he had intended giving it to me when we arrived at Tilbury, but in view of his sinister dream he preferred me to have it then. I thanked him, and put it in my jacket pocket.

"Now comes the strangest part of my story. The night before we reached England, shortly before eight bells, the cry of 'Man over-

board!" was raised. I was in my cabin at the time, and the first mate was on the bridge. It was a dark night with a fairly heavy sea running, and two of the passengers—Colonel Rackham and a Mr. Bingham—smoking a last cigar on the promenade deck, saw a deck chair with what seemed to be a man's figure in it swept overboard, and raised the cry. Mr. Cherry—the mate—threw a lifebelt over and had flares lighted, but in the dark rough sea nothing could be seen, so he did not lower a boat. He altered the steamer's course to circle round the spot at reduced speed, and sent for me. The first thing I did upon coming on deck was to muster passengers and crew, and take a tally. It was then discovered that Maitland was missing—washed overboard, as was supposed. I cruised around for some time longer, flares out and siren hooting, and then, knowing that nothing further could be done, put the *Whiteaway* on her course again.

"When we reached Tilbury the following day the *Whiteaway* was boarded by detectives from Scotland Yard, who held up disembarkation while they looked over the passengers and examined the ship. They told me that a diamond worth nearly twenty thousand pounds had been stolen from the offices of the De Veere Diamond Mining Company at Johannesburg, and they were searching every ship touching at African ports on the homeward voyage. A gang of international diamond thieves had brought off the coup, and the thieves—or thief—were believed to be making their way to Amsterdam by way of England to dispose of the gem. When the detectives heard of my missing passenger they pricked up their ears, and insisted upon going to his stateroom to examine his belongings. But they found nothing suspicious there; so, after another look around the ship, they went on shore.

"After the passengers had passed through the Customs and left for London by train, I went ashore myself, with two of the seamen carrying Mr. Maitland's box. It was placed with my own luggage into a cab—not a taxi, but an old fashioned four-wheeler. I got into the vehicle myself, and directed the cabman to drive me home.

"My house lies five miles from the docks near Grays, close to a lonely stretch of river marshes. As it happened the place was empty. At Durban I had received a letter from my wife to say that her mother in Scotland was dangerously ill, and she had been compelled to go to her bedside. She did not expect to be back by the time the *Whiteaway* got in, but she wrote that I would find everything in order, and she had told the girl to run in every morning to look after me until she was able to return.

"We reached The Briars—that's the name of my little place—about seven o'clock, and the driver helped to carry the luggage inside. The passenger's trunk was rather heavy to lift, and the cabman grumbled about its weight. However, we got it into the sitting room. I paid the man and he drove off.

"As the sound of his departing wheels died away I lit the gas in the dining room, and found that the maid had laid supper there in anticipation of my return. Before sitting down to it, I went over the house to make sure that everything was safe. Returning downstairs, my eye fell upon the trunk of the missing passenger in the sitting room, and I wondered what had made the confounded thing so heavy to lift. Maitland, on the strength of his foreboding, had insisted upon giving me one of his trunk keys, and I had slipped it on my own keyring. As I stood looking down on the trunk the thought came to me to open it. Bringing out my bunch of keys—which I carry in my trousers pocket on a chain—I singled out the key, inserted it in the lock, and flung back the lid. My God, what a sight met my eyes! In the trunk lay a doubled-up body—the corpse of its owner Mr. Maitland."

I uttered a startled exclamation. Colwin Grey did not speak, but the motionless intensity of his eyes revealed how deeply he was interested by our visitor's story. Captain Masters sighed, wiped the perspiration from his pale face with a trembling hand, and continued:—

"The face of the corpse was covered with blood, and the inside of the trunk was spattered with it. So far as I could see, the unfortunate man's throat had been cut savagely before his body was packed away into the box. But I was so horrified at the dreadful spectacle that I slammed down the lid hastily, and rushed from the house, almost distracted with fear. Slamming the door behind me, I wandered about the desolate river flats in the rain, wondering what to do in the horrible predicament in which I was placed. What possible explanation could I give of the murdered corpse of this passenger of my ship, brought home by me in the dead man's trunk to my own house? Cold terror struck through me at the thought that even then I was carrying the key of that hideous trunk on my chain. Who would believe my story of what had happened? Certainly not an English judge and jury. In a delirium of despair I walked aimlessly for hours trying to plan some course of action, but without avail. Finally that story I had read of you came into my mind, and as a last resource I took train to London and came here, in the hope that you might be able to help me."

"You have acted wisely," said Grey. "Now I am going to ask you a few questions, and please be explicit in detail in your replies. Did anyone see Maitland off at Durban?"

"No; he came aboard alone."

"How long was it before you became friendly with him?"

"Shortly after leaving Durban. The odd places we had both been in made a kind of a bond between us, and we passed many a pleasant hour exchanging reminiscences. Poor fellow, I little dreamt then of the terrible fate in store for him." Captain Masters sighed heavily.

"Your feelings do you credit, captain. But, apart from the pleasant chats about little known parts of the world, did you ever talk with your passenger of anything else? Personal matters, for instance?"

"Once or twice. One day Mr. Maitland asked me where I lived ashore, and said he had a lonely man's envy for anyone with wife and home. I laughingly replied that married men were sometimes as badly off as bachelors, adding that this trip I was returning to an empty house. He asked me why, and I told him of the letter my wife had sent to Durban."

"Could any of the other passengers have overheard that conversation?"

"No; we were on the bridge at the time."

Colwin Grey nodded thoughtfully. "On the night Maitland took you to his stateroom to tell you of his dream, did you take notice of his trunk?"

"Not specially, I glanced casually at it when he opened it, but that was all. I observed that the upper part or tray was full of what I took to be curios, carefully wrapped in tissue paper."

"Did he lift out the tray?"

"No; he took out a few curios to show me, and then put them back again. After he had given me the curio I told you of, he locked up the trunk, and we left the cabin."

"Ah! That kauri-gum curio strikes me as an interesting feature of the case. I wish you had brought it with you. I should like to see it."

"By chance I did. Maitland advised me to carry it ashore myself because it was fragile and easily broken. I did so, intending to put it under a glass case when I got home, but in the shock of my discovery I rushed out of the house with it still in my pocket."

"Capital!" said Grey. "Let us see it."

From his pocket our visitor produced a spherical object like a



large india-rubber ball wrapped in tissue paper. From this covering he extracted a yellowish-brown spheroid, highly polished and transparent as crystal, with an object resembling the model of a small sailing ship in its interior. Colwin Grey examined the curio closely, then took down a book from the bookcase, and turned over the leaves.

"Kauri," he muttered. "Ah! here it is. 'Kauri or Cowry, or kauri-pine, n. Maori name for the tree *Agathis australis*, Sal. (formerly *Dammara* A.) *N.O. Coniferae*. Various spelt, earlier often called *Cowdie*. Kauri-gum, n. the resin which exudes from the *Kauri* (q.v.) used in making varnish.'"

"Yes," said Captain Masters, "and it makes the best varnish in the world. There were a colony of gum-diggers—mostly Austrians—in New Zealand before the war. The gum falls into the ground as the trees die, and, not being soluble in water, remains there. The diggers tap likely places with long pointed sticks, and if they find small pieces of gum sticking to the end of the spear, they start to dig. And every gum-field yields a few curios formed by the liquid gum fossilizing around some object in the earth, which sometimes takes a strange shape in the lump of gum. The gum-diggers look out for these, and sell them to dealers at a higher price—from five to ten pounds for a good one. I remember seeing one piece in a shop near the Auckland Museum for which the shopkeeper asked fifty pounds. It was cut and polished like a diamond, with an angel's figure with outstretched wings inside."

During this explanation Grey had been examining the curio through a lens. He put down the glass and looked at Captain Masters.

"I suppose the Customs officers did not bother to go through your luggage when you landed?" he said.

"They know me too well for that," said Captain Masters. "They know I wouldn't dream of evading the law. Yesterday one of the examiners, who is a friend of mine, jocularly asked me if I had anything to declare. I invited him with a laugh to look through my belongings and see. God knows what I should have done had he taken me at my word and opened Maitland's trunk." Captain Masters shuddered at the thought.

"And yet, according to your story, the body was not there when the detectives examined the trunk in the cabin," said Grey.

"That is the strange part of it. I know it wasn't."

"Why are you so sure?"

"The detectives lifted out the tray to go through the trunk."

"And what was underneath?"

"Merely clothes and personal effects."

"Yet the body must have been in the trunk when it was carried off the ship?"

"There can be no doubt of that."

"Interesting, very! One more question, Captain Masters. The *Whiteaway* carries wireless, I suppose?"

"She does."

"Did you receive a wireless message to the effect that the ship was to be searched by detectives at Tilbury?"

Captain Masters hesitated, "I *did* receive a message by wireless, but it was confidential," he said.

"Quite so, but we can imagine what it contained. Did you speak of this message to anyone aboard—Maitland or anybody else?"

"Certainly not," answered Captain Masters, reddening. "I have already said the wireless was confidential."

"And you say that Maitland's throat was cut?"

"I believe so, though I didn't stop to investigate. The sight of his bloodstained body gave me such a shock that I let fall the lid with a cry, and bolted out of the house."

"An action quite understandable, all things considered," commented Grey suavely. "Altogether, a very strange and unusual case. What do you think, Haldham? Have you any theory to advance—any suggestion to make?"

I hesitated, then said:

"It seems to me that the passenger Maitland must have been murdered aboard the *Whiteaway*, and the cry of 'Man overboard!' raised by an accomplice to give the murderer an opportunity to conceal the body in the trunk."

"But the body wasn't in the trunk when the detectives searched it at Tilbury," Colwin Grey replied. "I'm afraid that theory won't do, though it is fairly certain that the cry of 'Man overboard!' was raised merely as a blind for some deeper purpose. However, theories are rather premature until we know more of the facts, and those facts, unless I am very much mistaken, are to be found in Captain Masters' house in Essex—or, to speak accurately, in the package of grim luggage which the captain conveyed to his home in a four-wheeled cab. I propose to return with him and look into this matter. Will you drive us down in my car, Haldham?"

"Certainly," I replied.

"Then let us start at once. I've the fancy that the less time we

lose the better. And with Captain Masters' permission I will take care of his curio for the present."

He wrapped the kauri-gum in its tissue paper, and dropped it in his pocket. We then left the house. Colwin Grey kept his car in a garage off Theobalds Road, and thither we directed our steps. Crossing the road, we encountered a police constable beneath the arc-light, who nodded to my friend. "A wet night, Mr. Grey!" he said cheerily. Captain Masters shrank closer to my side, but the burly policeman did not even glance at him. Entering the garage, we obtained the car from a sleepy and shock-headed youth, and set out for Essex.

We drove through the empty streets of London in silence. I could see by the set expression of Colwin Grey's face that he was thinking deeply, and in no mood for words. Nevertheless, I would have liked to know what his thoughts were about this strange adventure upon which we were embarked, for I had the feeling that his wonderful faculties had reached some definite conclusion about a mystery which was shrouded in sinister darkness to me. Captain Masters sat huddled in his seat, the picture of misery and despair, though from time to time he aroused himself sufficiently to give me a direction as to the route.

In this fashion we drove through the silent countryside until we reached a small rural town near the river. Captain Masters indicated a lonely dark road with half a dozen houses, and told me in a low tone that The Briars was the last on the left.

"Then we had better leave the car on this open ground," said Grey. "I do not want to take it up to the house."

We left the car and proceeded up the street. The Briars was isolated, with river flats around it and the river beyond. The place looked gloomy, but a chink of light fell from the fanlight upon a large tree with spreading branches which threw a dark shadow between us and the house.

In silence we walked down the garden path, my own nerves unpleasantly tense at the thought of the grim thing which lay awaiting us within. Captain Masters bent down to the door with his key, and I heard the faint click of the lock. Next moment we stood in the dimly lighted hall, and I heard the captain say something about having left on the gas in the sitting room. Followed the sound of a match scraped across a box, and Captain Masters, cupping the light in his hands, nodded to a door gaping blackly off the passage. "It's in there," he whispered.

We understood, and followed him in. The captain fumbled with the gas jet above him, and a flame of gas flared noisily above our heads. In the light a large traveling trunk confronted us, dark brown and oblong, plastered with steamer labels. Colwin Grey advanced towards it, and as he did so I saw with amazement that he held a revolver in his hand. Then my eyes went back to the box, waiting in suspense for the horrible contents to be revealed. Grey bent over and flung back the lid. The trunk was empty.

The effect of this discovery upon Captain Masters was stupendous. He uttered one loud cry of deadliest terror, and stared with open mouth at Colwin Grey and myself, as though he suspected us of spiriting the body away. At length he found words.

"The body was there, I'll swear," he stammered. "I saw it—I saw the blood—"

"Oh, the blood is still there," said Grey coolly, then murmured to himself: "Very neat, very ingenious! I don't think I've ever come across a cleverer piece of work."

Captain Masters and myself could only stare at him in bewilderment as he bent over the empty box, examining it carefully. He rose to his feet with an unusual light in his eye.

"Well, Captain Masters," he said, "you have brought us here on a wild-goose chase with your story of a corpse in a box. Next time you come home after a long sea voyage I hope you'll examine your luggage more carefully before disturbing me with such preposterous nonsense!"

He uttered these words in a loud harsh tone, regarding the unhappy captain with angry face. The captain sought to utter a rueful apology, but Colwin Grey cut him short by declaring, in the same emphatic voice, that he was going home. He made for the door as he spoke, with the dismayed captain still murmuring excuses at his heels. I came in their rear, lost in amazement at this inexplicable conclusion of a strange affair. In this fashion we reached the door, but the instant we were in the open air Grey's manner immediately changed.

"Quick! Let us creep back into the house again without a sound. Captain Masters, you go in first, turn off the gas, and keep quiet. Haldham, I want you to stand guard over the front door. Then leave the rest to me. But, mind—not a whisper, not a sound!"

I nodded without understanding in the least, and I saw by Captain Masters' amazed face that he was equally in the dark as he crept back into the house to carry out his instructions. As the lights disappeared Colwin Grey and myself followed him in. I crouched

down in the hall, near the door, to await events.

Time passed heavily as I waited there, wondering what all this meant. The silence was so intense that somewhere in the house I heard a clock telling off the seconds with hurried tick, and presently it struck the hour of two with a metallic chime. The more I reflected upon Captain Masters' story and its outcome, the more puzzled I became. What could it all mean? What had become of the body he had brought ashore in the trunk, and where had it disappeared? I had visions of the dead flesh moving awfully through the darkness of the empty house, looking into shrouded rooms, listening and peering in the stillness with sightless eyes.

And then I actually did hear the sound of a door creaking overhead. I listened intently, with the feeling that perhaps my imagination was playing tricks. But no! For my ears next caught distinctly the soft pad of stockinged feet, as if someone was creeping stealthily downstairs. My eyes vainly sought to pierce the darkness as I listened, wondering whether either of my companions had heard. The next moment Colwin Grey's voice broke the silence sharply.

"The door, Haldham! Watch the door!"

A deafening report followed hard on his words, and in the flash which accompanied it I saw a small figure crouching by the foot of the stairs, revolver in hand. The man made a rush as I saw him, but at the same instant the lithe, active form of Grey sprang upon him and bore him down. There was the sound of a scuffle in the darkness, and then Colwin Grey's voice broke the silence again.

"Light the gas, somebody!"

I hastened to comply, and the lighted hall showed a small writhing figure in my friend's grasp. At the sight of the little man with a blotched red face Captain Masters gave a loud cry, like one who saw a ghost.

"Maitland!" he cried; "Mr. Maitland, as I live! Oh, thank God you are not murdered!"

The grotesque figure with the spotted face ceased struggling and gave him an ugly look.

"I'd like to kill you for an old fool!" he snarled.

"Come, Maitland, this is really very ungrateful on your part," said Colwin Grey, "considering the trouble Captain Masters has been put to in helping you to escape. True, it was involuntary on his part, but that does not lessen your debt. I am surprised at you."

Captain Masters looked from one to the other like a man unable to credit his senses.

"I don't understand this," he faltered. "I found Mr. Maitland with his throat cut, in that box." He pointed with a shudder to the empty trunk. "Now I see him—"

"You imagined you found him there with his throat cut," interposed Colwin Grey. "What you actually did see was a man simulating death to deceive anyone who might peep into the trunk—though the pose was principally for your benefit."

"But the blood?" said Captain Masters, apparently only half-convinced.

"Coloring matter—a mere trick," returned Grey contemptuously. "You will observe that it is already beginning to wear off, giving your friend Maitland a singular, spotted appearance not unlike a red leopard."

"Well, thanks to you, Mr. Grey, I'm no longer in danger of being arrested as his murderer," said the captain, in a heartfelt tone. "But what did he do this for—that's what I want to know. Was it a joke? If so, it's not my idea of one. In fact, it strikes me as a very ungentlemanly thing for a *Whiteaway* passenger to do."

"Most ungentlemanly," said Colwin Grey gravely. "But then Mr. Maitland can hardly lay claim to the title of a gentleman. No gentleman has aliases, and Mr. Maitland has several: quite a number, in fact. The most notorious is one by which he is now being searched for by the police of three countries—Richard Denton, better known as Dick the Galloper, international diamond thief, wanted for the theft of a blue diamond, worth twenty thousand pounds, stolen from the De Veere Mining Company's offices in Johannesburg a month ago."

"But where—"

The sound of heavy footsteps in the hall broke into the colloquy, and the next moment two uniformed police officers were staring in suspiciously upon us. They entered the room, but at the sight of Grey the face of one of them cleared.

"Why, Mr. Colwin Grey, we didn't expect to find you here," he said. "Someone came to the station just now with a story of revolver shots at The Briars, so we hurried along. What is the trouble, and who is that chap you have hold of?"

"A gentleman from Durban, Stone, who calls himself Maitland—Mr. Reginald Maitland. It is by that name he appears on the passenger list of the steamer *Whiteaway*, by which he traveled to this country. But I fancy he is better known in police circles as Richard Denton, otherwise Dick the Galloper."

"Dick the Galloper!" exclaimed Sergeant Stone. "Well, this is a

stroke of luck. The De Veere Company have offered a reward of two hundred pounds for his arrest. I wonder if he has the diamond in his possession?"

"I do not think you will find it on him," said Colwin Grey. "Still, it may not be hidden away so carefully that we need altogether despair of recovering it. If I get on the track of it I'll let you know at once."

"Thank you, Mr. Grey," said Sergeant Stone. "There's a big reward out for its recovery. And I'll search this chap thoroughly as soon as I have him under lock and key. It is possible he may have it hidden about him."

For the first time I caught the gleam of a sneering smile upon the prisoner's face. It passed, leaving him dejected as before. Sergeant Stone stepped closer and slipped handcuffs on him.

"I'd like to know how you ran across the Galloper, Mr. Grey," he said.

"It's a strange story, Stone, but I'm afraid I must leave it for the *soi-disant* Mr. Maitland to relate. We must be getting back to London. Goodnight! Come, Haldham."

An hour later Grey and I were back in our quiet room, drinking coffee prepared by the excellent Thorpe, who had waited up for our return. And I had no desire to sleep until I had heard from my companion's lips how he had arrived at his conclusions in this remarkable case.

"I reached them while Captain Masters was telling his story," he replied, pouring himself out another cup of coffee. "From the outset it was apparent to me that Maitland—to call him so—had an ulterior motive in making himself agreeable to the captain of the *Whiteaway*, and he ingratiated himself with a flow of pleasant talk and the gift of the curio, which Captain Masters obviously coveted. It is a curious point that so companionable a man as Maitland left Durban without a friend to see him off; but he had his own reasons for being alone, as he had for insinuating himself into the good graces of the simple commander of the *Whiteaway*. And although Captain Masters denies it, I fancy Maitland was astute enough to extract something in the course of their intimate talks about that wireless communication from Scotland Yard. Even if he didn't, the diamond thief would have a pretty shrewd notion that the ship was bound to be searched at Tilbury, and he made his plans accordingly. The night before England was reached he carried out the 'man overboard' trick by means of a deck chair and an overcoat. He then hid himself away—probably in one of the



boats hanging over the side—until the detectives had boarded the *Whiteaway* at Tilbury Docks and inspected the passengers. Afterwards it was an easy matter for him, in the bustle of the ship's arrival, to slip down unnoticed into his stateroom, throw the contents of his trunk through the porthole, and hide away in it. At The Briars I observed that the trunk had several air holes for breathing bored in it, and locked with an automatic catch which could be manipulated from inside. Even after the detectives had left the ship, Maitland did not dare to take the risk of walking ashore, for several reasons. No one knew better than he that although the Scotland Yard men had gone off, there would be a couple of them waiting at the foot of the gangway to watch the passengers disembark. There was also the risk of some of his fellow passengers recognizing the resurrected drowned man, and raising an outcry. Another reason was that he did not wish to part company with Captain Masters."

I did not understand the last reason, but my mind turned to another point.

"But the pretended gash in the throat, and the bloodstains," I asked. "What was the idea of that trick?"

"For one thing, Maitland had to reckon with the chance of the trunk being opened or looked into before it reached The Briars."

"I don't see how that applies," I rejoined.

"In this way. The sight of a man crouching in a trunk would arouse suspicion and almost certain capture, but a supposed blood-stained corpse would cause the discoverer to recoil in horror and look for a police constable, thus giving the corpse a chance to make good his escape. But principally Maitland counted upon Masters opening the trunk and rushing away in horror when he saw what was inside. If Captain Masters hadn't done so he would have come out of the trunk himself during the night. Whatever happened did not matter to him, so long as he achieved his end. But I fancy Maitland foresaw that Captain Masters would act exactly as he did, and leave him alone in The Briars."

"Leave him alone for what?"

"To regain the curio he gave him aboard the *Whiteaway*. He did not foresee that Captain Masters would carry it away with him."

"Why should Maitland want the curio?"

"My dear fellow, is it possible that you do not see?"

I reddened a little at his amused tone. "No, I do not," I rejoined.

"I must confess that you go too deep for me."

"Well, perhaps I am wrong," he said with a smile. "However, we

still have the curio, so let us look at it again." He drew it forth as he spoke, and after a brief examination of it, handed his glass to me. "Can you see a faint mark on the polished surface of the gem?"

"Yes; an almost invisible crack."

"Call it a crack if you like, but to me it is more like an invisible join, as if the curio had been joined with spirit gum. But, according to Captain Masters, these curios are natural formations—pieces of fossilized kauri-gum which are found in the ground. Let us investigate this one, and see. There is a small hammer in that drawer behind you, Haldham. Will you pass it to me?"

I did so, and he struck the curio a sharp blow, shattering it. Bending eagerly over the fragments, he rose with a small piece of cottonwool in his hand. Unrolling this carefully, he placed upon the table a glittering stone which sent forth flashing blue rays in the rosy firelight glow.

"A diamond!" I cried.

"The De Veere blue diamond, worth nearly twenty thousand pounds," said my companion. "Not so large as the famous Hope blue diamond, but a very magnificent stone, nevertheless. Observe how it has been cut in an irregular rosette to show off its wonderful blue fire! An ingenious hiding place, was it not?—as ingenious as that chosen by the thief. If Captain Masters had not forgotten to take the curio from his pocket when he went home we should never have seen the diamond or Maitland again. As I conjectured, he waited in The Briars for Masters to return, and thus we were lucky enough to lay hands upon both. Maitland suffered from a modern fault. He overreached himself by being just a little too clever. And now, before we go to bed, Haldham, I had better ring up Scotland Yard and tell them to send round for the diamond. It is better in their possession than ours, even though Maitland is under lock and key."

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## **SOLUTION TO THE SEPTEMBER "UNSOLVED":**

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By leading with a 5 the first player can always win. If your opponent plays another 5, you play a 2 and score 12. Then as often as he plays a 5 you play a 2, and if at any stage he drops out of the series, 3, 10, 17, 24, 31, you step in and win. If after your lead of 5 he plays anything but another 5, you make 10 or 17 and win. The first player may also win by leading a 1 or a 2, but the play is complicated. It is, however, well worth the reader's study.

# BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



**I**n *The Barbed Wire Noose* (Mysterious Press, \$15.95, 184 pp.), author Harold Adams offers us another mystery featuring Carl Wilcox, who finds himself in the surprising position of being the only law in town (the town being the small, isolated community of Corden, South Dakota). Carl's personal experience on the other side of the cell bars comes in handy when he is called on to break up a poolroom brawl, but it doesn't go a long way toward helping him find out who strung up a local loner. This is the sixth book to star Wilcox, whose unique background and very special narrative style make him the freshest P.I. I've stumbled upon in eons. I can now not only look forward to future books but will have the great pleasure of hunting up the five earlier books, which I somehow missed. I urge you to do so as well.

Peter Lovesey, the author of the Sergeant Cribb series which has been featured in this column, has a new novel of psychological suspense (Mysterious Press, \$15.95, 224 pp.), and it's a dilly. **Rough Cider** is the term given to homemade cider that's aged in barrels in British farmyards. It's also a key to an old crime in Dr. Theo Sinclair's past, when a human skull was found in a cider barrel on a farm where Theo—then a nine-year-old Londoner—was evacuated for safety during the days of the Blitz. The incident was hard on the boy because the man accused of the murder, a young U.S. serviceman stationed at a base near the farm, had been es-

pecially kind to the young Theo, while Theo's unwitting sworn statement helped hang the Yank. Now a pretty young American girl shows up on Theo's doorstep claiming that she's the daughter of the executed man—and that he was innocent of the wrongdoing. The truth, it soon appears, may open up more than the psychic scars Theo carries still. This is strongly written and evocative.

Another backstage mystery is acted out in the reprint of Barbara Paul's **The Fourth Wall** (Bantam, \$3.50, 246 pp.). The protagonist is Abigail James, playwright, whose career has finally taken a turn: her play *Foxfire* is a Broadway hit. Then a series of horrible and vicious crimes begins, and—but I don't want to give anything away. This novel is rich with backstage lore, and gut-wrenchingly suspenseful; it is also too violent for the squeamish when the mad fantasies of a psycho take center stage. There's a twist ending that also won't amuse all readers, so beware. This is a long novel, filled with cruel nightmares and enough mayhem to vie with *Hamlet*. The whole production is even more akin to Jacobean tragedy, come to think of it, which means that no one will complain that *The Fourth Wall* lacks drama.

New on the crime scene is a prominent pianist and amateur sleuth, John Field, as well as his creator, Joan Higgins. Both author and hero debut in **A Little Death Music** (Dodd, Mead, \$15.95, 214 pp.), and one can only hope we'll see more of both in the future. The setting is a very wealthy and somewhat isolated Florida community—specifically, the concert hall that's part of a mansion-complex being donated to the community by the town's leading citizen. There's lots of backstage lore here, too, glimpses of rehearsals and performance mishaps and the like having to do with world-class professional musicians. The plot playfully stretches plausibility, but narrated in Field's own irreverent and anecdotal style, one doesn't mind in the least. This is jolly entertainment and should please mystery-reading music-lovers everywhere.

**Hidden Lake** by Trish Janeschutz is the name of the small Florida community that is home to more than two hundred practicing psychics, seers, astrologers, and their ilk. It's also a rather isolated, old fashioned place, where Detective Deirdre O'Malley has found policework pretty routine and nominal. Then her friend, a psychic named Anna Lemont, is brutally murdered—and the other members of the psychic community are, in varying degrees, suffering psychic shocks themselves. Even Deirdre seems to be plagued with fears and nightmares, and everyone seems to agree about one thing: the killer isn't finished. This has several strong characterizations,

a fascinating background, and lots of suspense. What more could you want? (Ballantine, \$3.50, 309 pp.)

**Mary's Grave** by Malcolm McClintick (Doubleday Crime Club, \$12.95, 181 pp.) is spooky, too, but it's about ghosts—or actually, it's about a severed human hand that's discovered on the grave of a young woman long dead, whose "ghost" is a town legend. This is a police procedural that's very "British" in its format, classically presenting suspects and clues as Kelso and his colleagues proceed with their investigation. Kelso tries to ignore the ghost stories, but he senses further danger to the owner of the hand—the victim is a young woman—and perhaps to other young women in the area. And, as it turns out, Mary's ghost does have a part to play in the plot. This is quiet but sure-footed, and I wouldn't mind watching Kelso and his cronies work again in future novels.

**Pale Kings and Princes** (Delacorte, \$15.95, 264 pp.) is Robert Parker's latest in the saga of Spenser, Boston-based P.I. With the TV series and all the attention author Parker is getting, can there be a reader yet unfamiliar with Spenser? If so, *Pale Kings* is a good place to start; it's vintage Parker. Spenser, Hawk, and Susan are here, and the latter two have gone back to playing more supporting roles in the drama. The premise is pure and simple: Spenser is hired to find out why a reporter—whose death was ruled a suicide—actually died, and was he indeed murdered as his employer believes? This is detective fiction for grownups, as always, with the toughness and cruelty and violence that often attend hardboiled P.I. novels. Parker, however, is one of the masters with it.

An entirely different entertainment is Layne Littlepage's novel, **Murder-by-the-Sea** (Doubleday Crime Club, \$12.95, 183 pp.). Set in Carmel-by-the-Sea (better known as simply Carmel, California), this is a backstage mystery involving a varied and eccentric group of residents who are putting on little theater production of a—what else?—murder mystery play. The lead actress and protagonist is the still-lovely Vivienne Montrose, film ingenue from the forties, now professionally retired. There's an appealing innocence and timelessness to Vivienne and her crowd, while the plot unfolds against the beauty of Carmel. It all adds up to a novel that is strongly reminiscent of a ovable period mysteries, and should appeal to readers who enjoy the "classics."

# MURDER BY DIRECTION

by Peter Shaw



**T**he *Stepfather* is one of those thrillers in which you know who the villain is and what he is going to do. It is only a matter of time until he is ready to commit murder, but the question of *how much* time means the difference between life and death. . . .

Jerry Blake is a friendly, personable, homicidal maniac who marries widows with teenaged daughters. He lives with them for a time, creating the perfect family of his fantasies, but inevitably they do something to disappoint him, and he decides to move on. He quits his job, takes a few days to find a new town with a new widow and daughter, and then comes home to murder his current loved ones. Afterwards, he alters his hair, beard, or mustache, and goes on to his new life.

We pick up Jerry moving in with Susan and her daughter,

Stephanie, who perversely finds her exemplary stepfather "creepy." Susan tries to reconcile Stephanie to the smiling, even-tempered, hard-working provider and paterfamilias, Jerry. And naturally when unreasonable Stephanie begins to misbehave in school, Susan sends her to a nice psychiatrist.

The point seems to be that the typical, happy American family can harbor unsuspected terrors beneath its surface. But the debunking of the American pieties about family is by now merely a cliché. The real power of *The Stepfather* as a thriller lies elsewhere. It is a movie that reveals the hidden weakness of modern families to be not some unimaginable perversity, but rather an all too familiar reasonableness.

In former times a stepfather was thought of as a cold, cruel tyrant over his adopted children. But in our enlightened,

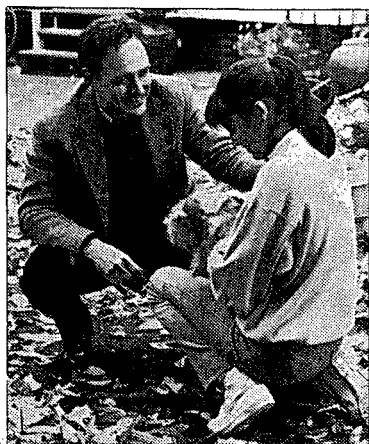
modern way we deny this stereotype to the point of treating stepfathers with special consideration, giving them every benefit of doubt. For Stephanie modern enlightenment threatens to prove fatal. For as Jerry draws near his breaking point, Susan appears ever more compelled to trust him as a token of her having overcome the tug of ancient prejudice against stepfathers.

According to our theory, Stephanie's psychiatrist should have proved to be just as unreachable as Susan. Instead—to our relief—he believes the girl and sets out to learn what makes Jerry tick. At the same time, the brother of Jerry's previous wife, who has been searching for her killer, starts to close in. But Jerry proves to be a psy-

chopathic genius at detecting suspicion, and so in the end, mother and daughter are left to face him alone.

The tension is terrific as Jerry finally reaches his snapping point, grabs a kitchen knife, and sets out to kill his latest wife and daughter. One can't help but think of Hitchcock, even though here the camera work is far more straightforward. The director of *The Stepfather* couldn't help thinking of Hitchcock either: he has Stephanie take a shower to remind us of *Psycho*, and then recalls *The Birds* by having her desperately look out the bathroom window for help, only to see nothing but dozens of birds perched on telephone wires. No doubt there is much genuine admiration for Hitchcock in such references to his works. But the flashing on the screen of what amounts to an academic joke tends to undercut the tension. Much better would be a modest "thanks to Alfred Hitchcock" somewhere among the credits.

Despite these brief interruptions, *The Stepfather* moves toward and through its climax of terror with smooth professionalism. Recalling Hitchcock at a deeper level, it plays on one's inchoate, irrational mistrust of stepfathers, thereby reminding us that the modern world has yet to succeed in conquering all of mankind's demons.



Jerry Blake (Terry O'Quinn) and Stephanie (Jill Schoelen) in *The Stepfather*.



# THE STORY THAT WON



Arthur Tress

The May Mysterious Photograph contest (photo above) was won by Frank Peirce of College Station, Texas. Honorable mentions go to David Martindale of Houston, Texas; Edith McDowell Edson of Pueblo, Colorado; James T. Hammons of Louisville, Kentucky; George Bessieson of Somerville, New Jersey; Kathryn M. Johnson of Eudora, Kansas; M. E. Marble of Chicago, Illinois; John and Rosa Dalbec of Youngstown, Ohio; and Jo Taylor of Madison, Wisconsin.

## THE DEVIL, YOU SAY! by Frank Peirce

Gabriel hit a sour note on his Louis Armstrong trumpet, the first such note St. Peter had heard in Heaven in almost 2000 years.

St. Peter was spraying the hinges of the Pearly Gates with WD-40. "What's the matter, Gabe?" he asked.

"Someone stole my two new pair of wings."

"Those polyester-and-gold, drip-dry wings you were testing?"

Gabriel nodded. "I washed them and hung them out to dry on Cloud 9 this morning. When I went back for them, they were gone."

"You're sure you didn't misplace them?"

"You'd like to think that. Then you wouldn't have to admit you let in someone you shouldn't."

St. Peter nodded, reluctantly. "Yes," he said.

The heavenly Muzak faded, and a brilliant voice said, "You made no mistake, Peter."

Gabriel put on his Foster-Grant shades against the brilliance of the voice. "Who stole my wings, Lord?" he asked.

"There's your thief!" the Lord said, and a shadow appeared against a distant cloud.

"It looks like a human windmill!" Gabriel said.

"I see but three wings," St. Peter protested.

As they watched, one by one the wings fell off. A claw-like hand grasped for support, but found none, only air, and the shadow plummeted from view.

"Who was that, Lord?" Gabriel asked.

"Lucifer! The fallen angel I stripped of wings and drove from Heaven."

"The Devil, You say? But why would *he* steal wings, Lord?"

"Because he had none, and he missed being able to fly. He tried to make himself into a hell-i-copter."

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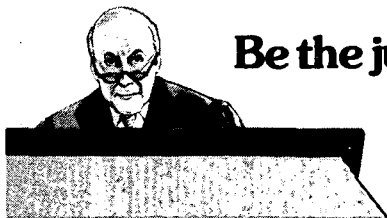
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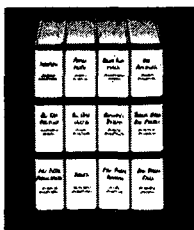
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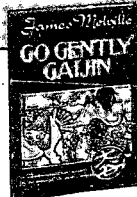
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